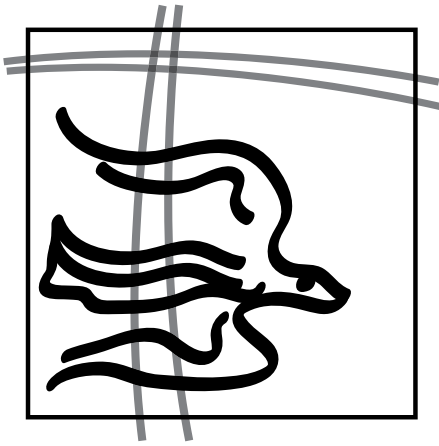


PAUL WITHOUT KITSCH

Paul C. Koch

Romans 8:31–39 contains some of the better known verses in the Bible. Its popularity is not owing to any prominence in the Revised Common Lectionary, where it appears only once, during the time after Pentecost. One might guess that the lectionary committee knew the text would get plenty of use in funerals and thus not need the extra exposure during Sunday worship services.

It's no surprise the text is a favorite at funeral services, since it reassures mourners that not even death can separate the deceased from God's love. Likely its common use during such difficult times accounts for its popularity. By now these verses have been canonized in more popular forms, like on plaques for sale in Christian bookstores. Although these verses have not yet entered the non-Christian cultural repertoire in the way that the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 have (consider rapper Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise," which begins, "As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"), Romans 8:31–39 certainly enjoys much prominence within the church.

The popularity of such a text can work against its power. Overuse, especially in kitschy forms like those plaques, domesticates the message to just another set of pious phrases. It becomes the work of the church's teachers and preachers to recapture the impact of Paul's message.

A good way to get at this impact is to consider where the text lies in Paul's larger argument. In his analysis of Paul's rhetoric, A. H. Snyman, for instance, comes to the standard scholarly conclusion that 8:31–39 is a flourish at the end of an argument that Paul has built over the preceding chapters. Snyman comments, "Paul is no longer seeking to convince his audience, but now—in this peroration—he makes a final appeal which is based on the elite audience's agreement and aims at evoking a full and emotionally charged consent to the shared affirmation."¹ Snyman contends that Paul has argued a particular case and now adds a coda in a highly stylized and emphatic way. "Our passage is epideictic because it celebrates certain Christian beliefs. It is an attempt to strengthen the adherence of the audience to these beliefs."²

There is good reason to call into question this view of Romans 8, but for the moment it helps to explain why the text has lent itself so easily to kitsch. Paul's larger arguments can be gleaned from reading verses 31–39 in isolation, but to do so is, in a sense, to enjoy the icing without the cake.

What then is the context? It isn't difficult to get at the arguments Paul has made in preceding chapters. Everything prior to 8:31–39 can be summarized simply as, "God grants righteousness to all who believe," a summary that reflects Paul's pronouncement in 3:21–22: "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Paul delivers this pronouncement in response to the perilous situation in which all people find themselves in relation to sin and the law. The emphatic "But now" (*Nyni δε*) bespeaks a revolution in thought at this point: redemption comes not through the law but by God's grace "as a gift" (3:24). This is the central argument that drives the next few chapters leading up to 8:31–39.

It is worth noting, however, that Paul makes this central point as early as the third chapter, and he doesn't get around to making his flourishing summary until the end of the eighth chapter. It is also worth noting—and this calls into question the view of 8:31–39 as mere rhetorical flourish—that between the third and eighth chapters, Paul does more than simply support the central claim he spells out in chapter 3. Between 3:20–21 and 8:31–39, we find something more than proofs of his central argument. We find an apostle in conflict. Rather than dispelling all problems and questions, Paul's pronouncement in 3:20–21 opens a door to a series of troubling questions that he must address. It is these conflicts that finally give meaning to the epideictic section at the end of chapter 8.

*The hearing of the gospel
is not the end, but the
beginning, of conflict.*

The first pressing conflict into which Paul's central pronouncement leads him is the question of whether Abraham and his biological descendents received any benefit from their physical circumcision, a notion clearly challenged by Paul's discussion

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of God's righteousness apart from the law (4:1). Paul was writing to an audience comprised of Jewish as well as Gentile converts.³ This notion would certainly have been difficult to swallow for the Jewish converts—and no less so for Paul himself—as they found their worldview shifting away from an understanding of righteousness defined by physical circumcision. Paul responds to the question by reasserting the primacy of faith over works, reminding his readers that Abraham believed God and so was reckoned righteous prior to his physical circumcision (4:9–10). What benefit did Abraham get from circumcision? Paul grants that circumcision was a “seal of the righteousness that he had by faith” (4:11), but he also maintains that this is not the sort of benefit anyone could boast about (4:2). There is a greater benefit here. The true benefit rests on God's grace. The promise is guaranteed to all of Abraham's descendents, not only the law's adherents but also those who share in Abraham's faith (4:16).

Paul then argues that the law even multiplied sin, but that the increase of sin led to an even greater increase of grace (5:20–21). This point now steers him into his second conflict. No less during Paul's time than today, the gospel seems to have given people the idea that an amplification of sin might be the best response to God's grace, since it would lead to a corresponding amplification of divine forbearance (6:1). For Paul, the suggestion is troubling because it misunderstands the new relationship between the believer and Christ. This mistaken view

assumes that there is no true conformity between the believer and Christ, and that there is no true liberation in Christ from the power of sin. To these false assumptions, Paul defines baptism as a burial with Christ in his death. When sinners are baptized they are joined to Christ's death, meaning that their sin is destroyed. Furthermore, just as Christ was raised, the believers also are raised to new life: they must consider themselves “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). They are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves to righteousness (6:17–18). Life lived under grace must be understood as true death and resurrection, and a truly new relationship to God.

Whereas this second conflict has Paul wrestling against an antinomian interpretation of grace, his next conflict confronts those with a dear affection for the law. Freedom from sin implies freedom from the law. To those who like the law, freedom from the law must come as a threat to the law's sanctity (7:7). This third conflict has no less contemporary relevance than the second! Paul must assure these nervous souls that the law is good. Sin takes advantage of the law and uses it to work death in human lives. Such

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misuse doesn't desecrate the law but rather shows how the law exposes sin.

It is in this conflict that Paul becomes especially personal. Verses 7:14–25 contain the only extended section between 3:20 (Paul's original statement of his central argument) and 8:31–39 (the argument's final flourish) in which Paul speaks in the first-person singular. While there certainly are rhetorical reasons for doing so, it's hard to read an impassioned

interjection like verse 24's “Wretched man that I am!” without sensing that Paul is exposing his own turmoil. It is striking to think that a preacher who wrote so clear a statement of grace as found in 3:20–21 could later in the same epistle reveal so much anguish. The pronouncement of God's righteousness apart from the law has not wiped away all uncertainty but rather left him to wrestle against himself even while he cries out in thanksgiving to God for rescuing him from

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“this body of death” (7:24–25). The law has revealed to him the depths of his inability to fulfill the law in his own body. The man who earlier could preach God's saving act now is at war with himself.

Paul finds himself dealing with at least one more conflict before the final declaration of God's indefatigable love in 8:31–39. We have been justified and we now have peace with God, yet the creation and we too still groan for redemption. In verses 8:18–23, the creation's present state is characterized by sufferings, futility, decay, and labor pains. These present realities elicit from Paul a discussion of hope. We await bodily redemption. We are God's children, and thus His heirs, though we do not yet see our inheritance. In these experiences of weakness, the Spirit comes to our aid and pleads to God (8:26–27). Paul's discussion here once again has overtones of his own personal experience. His discussion of weakness (*ἀσθενεία*) has parallels in II Corinthians 11 where he boasts in those things that demonstrate his weakness: imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst. Here again, one more time before 8:31–39, Paul the bold preacher of 3:20–21 can be

seen wrestling with the conflicts that envelop the Christian.

In his lectures on Romans of 1515–1516, Luther suggested one more conflict leading into the final section of chapter 8. Luther is perhaps unique among interpreters in reading 8:31–39 as an address to souls troubled over God’s election. Commenting on Paul’s discussion of predestination in the immediately preceding verses, Luther says:

On this text depends the entire passage which follows to the end of the chapter... He approaches, yes, from this point on begins to discuss the matter of predestination and election, which is not as deep a subject as is commonly thought, but rather is a wonderfully sweet thing for those who have the Spirit, but a bitter thing and harsh above all things for the prudence of the flesh... But now when he says: “Who will bring a charge? Who will condemn? Who will separate?” (vv. 33–35), he is showing that the elect are not saved by chance but by necessity... Indeed He saves us in this way and exposes His elect to as many rapacious forces as are mentioned here, all of which are striving to pull the elect down into damnation so that they might be lost, in order to show that He saves us not by our own merits, but purely by His own election and immutable will, in the very face of so many rapacious and terrifying adversaries who try in vain to harm us.⁴

In this matter, Luther acknowledges that the teaching of predestination both terrorizes the over-confident and comforts those who fear God. If God redeems sinners entirely out of His grace, then the human will is not even in the smallest way in charge of its own salvation. Those who have been justified are confronted by the God who elects.

The various conflicts through Romans 3–8 reveal something surprising about the structure of Paul’s thought. The apostle does not build an argument by stating a central thesis, then offering proofs to support it. His argumentation is far less linear. Rather, he states a central thesis and then unpacks the various conflicts that his thesis evokes. God’s righteousness has been given to us apart from works of the law, which implies several disturbing things: Abraham was not

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made righteous by physical circumcision; as sin increases, so does grace; we are freed from the law; justification does not do away with our suffering; and, following Luther, the justifying God turns out to be also the predestining God. To each of these challenges, Paul must give an account of the hope that is in him.

This kind of argument, built not on the various proofs of a thesis but on the exploration of conflicts occasioned by that thesis, suggests that there’s more to 8:31–39 than mere rhetorical flourish. Interpreters have called this passage “peroration,” “elevated eloquence,” “poetic beauty,” and “hymnic.”⁵ It may very well be all these things, but it is not mere decoration. Nor is it merely, as has also been suggested, an emotional affirmation of what has been affirmed intellectually.⁶ It is too facile to suggest that Paul and his audience already affirmed the central thesis intellectually and are now waiting to affirm it emotionally. If they have affirmed it in any way, whether emotionally *or* intellectually, they have also been assailed in every way, emotionally *and* intellectually. The preceding chapters have seen

one struggle after another undermine Paul’s thesis. Paul is not simply adding a flourish at the end of the struggle. He is proclaiming the gospel against all odds.

The totality of all these conflicts must be kept in mind in the interpretation of 8:31–39. When Paul asks, “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect?” he is at the very least referring to the many charges he has sustained in the preceding verses, charges that he has likely heard in his own mind and from the mouths of various opponents, charges that have challenged the gospel he proclaims. These verses are a renewed pronouncement of the gospel, not a repetition, in a more emotionally charged fashion, of an implacably proved argument.

This take on the end of Romans 8 has a few implications for the church’s proclamation and the life of faith. First of all, it should remind us that the pronouncement of the gospel and the reception of that gospel in faith do not mark the beginning of a life without conflict. It is not the job of Christians simply to affirm the gospel and then to spend the rest of their lives making arguments on behalf of that gospel based on their own unshaken convictions. Rather, it is the unavoidable situation of Christians to find themselves imperiled by doubts and challenges of many kinds. The hear-

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ing of the gospel is not the end, but the beginning, of conflict.

Second of all, the perils of doubts, questions, and challenges to the gospel should not halt the gospel’s proclamation. Against and in the midst of these perils, Paul delivers the powerful verses of 8:31–39. We can assume that, following chapter 8, Paul will continue to deal with the struggles brought about by the gospel; and indeed this is the

case, as already in the first verses of the ninth chapter, Paul finds himself in “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” over the status of his fellow Jews (9:2). Paul’s strong pronouncement in 8:31–39 does not rest on his

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having reached an ultimate position of clarity that would remain untested by subsequent doubts. Both leading up to and following these verses, conflict continues, and it is in the midst of this

conflict that Paul does the one thing a Christian must continue to do: speak boldly the promise of God’s mercy.

Finally, this understanding of 8:31–39 helps to free it from domestication. It is not mere decoration to Paul’s argument. When Christians teach and preach this text, they must remember that it arises out of conflict, not out of a simple rhetorical need to finish an argument strongly. In the midst of conflict, Christians can only speak such bold promises and cling to them in faith. Teachers and preachers can assume that their listeners, perhaps especially the ones who have heard the gospel before, are already surrounded by conflict. The task at the moment of teaching and preaching is to hold up a promise from Christ that undermines the apparent power that conflicts seem to hold over the

listeners and their world. The task is to challenge that power with bold proclamations of God’s love in Christ Jesus. LF

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Notes

1. A. H. Snyman, “Style and Meaning in Romans 8:31–9,” *Neotestamentica* 18 (1984): 227.
2. *Ibid.*, 228.
3. Joseph Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 32.
4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, LW 25 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 371.
5. Snyman, 227; Fitzmeyer, 529.
6. Snyman, 227.

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