

A Response to the Response of David L. Balch to
The Letter to the Romans by Herman C. Waetjen
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As this is the opening paper of this session, I want to make a couple of prefatory remarks. First, Herman Waetjen's work on Romans is a major piece of work that displays both existential seriousness and scholarly acumen. As such, it has been well worthwhile to spend time with, and I thank him for putting in the long hours and creative energy that have made it possible for us to have this meeting organized around his commentary. Second, David Balch's response is in fact an erudite paper in its own right, revealing an ability to read a complex text accurately, a creative mind as he explores an alternative interpretation of *Romans*, and an intimate acquaintance with both New and Old Testament scholars. Consequently, I can't do justice to his whole text in a 10-minute response, but will focus on what I regard to be particularly salient points.

Balch begins by drawing the distinction, crucial to Waetjen's hermeneutics, between having an object (in this case, the Bible, and more specifically, Paul's "Letter to the Romans") "present-at-hand" or "ready-to-hand" (Heidegger's distinction). In the former case, the object is simply an object for empirical investigation based on the Enlightenment assumption that this is how a dispassionate, investigating subject gains knowledge of the object. In the latter case, the investigating subject is not a dispassionate "I", but draws on her or his *a priori* ontological self, which, according to Heidegger, is made up of "care" and "solicitude," as well as of one's particular experiences. This self is not a disembodied "I," but is the "I am" of one's "Dasein," that is, of one's "being-in-the-world." It is this "I am" which alone in the encounter with the object ("Romans") can extract the real, existential meaning of the text. According to Waetjen, centuries of biblical scholarship has been characterized by the subject-object split of the Cartesian paradigm, and has therefore been unable to discern the real or deeper meaning of texts.

When this new, post-modern hermeneutic is applied to the interpretation of "Romans," a wholly new conclusion results. Waetjen maintains that the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith is not Paul's gospel in Romans. Both Calvin and Luther, following Augustine's doctrines of law-and-gospel and original sin, maintain that salvation is the result of Christ's atoning for human sin on the cross, but that human life after baptism ("in a crucifixion like his, and a resurrection like his") is still life under the law, and is still life afflicted with sin. Waetjen, on the contrary, thinks that there is a direct transition from Abraham to

Christ, and that the Mosaic law does not have the importance imputed to it by the Reformers. (It was constituted, according to Gal. 3:19, not by God, but by angels.) Consequently, salvation consists, not in atonement for failure to keep the requirements of the law, but in the “killing” of the law, and in the death of *hamartia* (sin). God’s justice is imparted apart from the law as a continuation and revitalization of the Abrahamic covenant. Therefore, salvation is not individualistic, but is the establishment of God’s justice in the world for all people. The universalism in this interpretation is not commented on by Balch, nor is the implicit notion of perfectionism, now that sin is conquered. Waetjen himself comments that the universal establishment of justice (instead of mere justification) is an eschatological phenomenon, but it is not clear whether this is a realized or a future eschatological reality.

One last comment on this first section of Balch’s response: He notes that the *a priori* content of the “I am” of Dasein includes both the categories of care and solicitude, which are intrinsic to “being-in-the-world,” and human experiences. In Waetjen’s criticisms of Luther and Calvin in their failure to see the universal salvation intrinsic to “Romans,” he obviously can’t fault them for invoking the I-It paradigm of Descartes, since they were antecedent to the Reformers. On the contrary, he praises the Reformers for approaching the text from their own “I am,” subjective perspective. At the same time, he criticizes them for their reliance on Augustine’s doctrines of original sin and justification, which prevents them from seeing the full scope of salvation as universal justice in Romans. There is an unresolved conflict here. Luther and Calvin’s appropriation of Augustine is part of their experience in-the-world, part of their “I am.” Why then is this experience a block to an authentic perception of what is really going on in “Romans?”

Balch concludes the first section of his paper with a crucial question, which actually doesn’t occur until near the end of his paper. Do Waetjen’s post-modern hermeneutics make a significant difference as to how the “Letter to the Romans” is interpreted? What effect does the Preface to the Commentary, which contains Waetjen’s distinction between Cartesian and Heideggerian interpretations of the relation between subject and object, have on the interpretation of “Romans?”

In Part 2 of his response, Balch notes that the rejection of the subject/object split is nothing unique to Waetjen in biblical studies. He cites many examples. What this leads to, however, is many different interpretations of texts, none of which is objective because objectivity is not a possibility. Even Paul, Balch avers, is not

exempt. He highlights the Christ event, universalizes it, and inserts it into history through his successful missionary experiences. This does not make it true; it makes it a part of human history.

At this point, Balch launches into a long analysis of post-modernism, including whether it can promote justice more successfully than the “modern” hermeneutic which preceded it, as Waetjen maintains. Balch doubts this. His contention is that the promotion of justice demands a modicum of rational thinking, which post-modernism ostensibly eschews. The issue here is whether a post-modern hermeneutic with its emphasis on existential interpretation is superior in the promotion of justice in the world to its classically rational predecessor. I take this as an expression of suspicion on Balch’s part of whether Waitjen’s post-modern interpretation of the over-arching justice of God in “Romans” is real.

The third part of Balch’s response deals with his own counter-proposal to Waetjen’s proposal for God’s universal justice as the theme of “Romans.” Balch regards Waetjen’s claims as too abstract and prefers a more concrete emphasis on the bringing together under the banner of Christ actual diverse ethnic groups such as Gauls (the hated enemies of Romans), Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Spaniards. This is a reversal of cultural values. He calls this a “post-colonial” reading of Romans, as opposed to a “post-modern” reading. Underlying this distinction is Balch’s contention that “Romans” is a practical, concrete book that intends to unite very diverse peoples of wildly different social classes under the gospel of Christ. Balch’s emphasis is pragmatic rather than theoretical. Whether a post-modern methodology can unearth this “unification of peoples” emphasis any better than a common-sense approach to “Romans” is problematic.

The fourth and final section of Balsh’s response deals with selected exegetical questions. This is where he shows his detailed knowledge of a plethora of biblical scholars, and I will comment on only one issue. This issue concerns whether Waetjen has properly dealt with Paul’s view of the Abrahamic covenant and of Mosaic Law in “Romans.” Balsh contends that there is a sharp difference between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The Abrahamic covenant is pure promise on the part of God, with no demand that Abraham or his people do anything to maintain the covenant. The Mosaic covenant, on the other hand, includes the giving of the Law of Moses, and the expectation is that Israelites must maintain the Law to keep the covenant valid. Balsh quotes Waetjen, as follows: “Jesus, as the seed of Abraham, fulfilled the conditions of the original testament that God

established with Abraham by eradicating *hamartia* and its consequences of death.” But, according to Balch, the Abrahamic covenant did not have conditions.

“Consequences of death” belongs to the Mosaic covenant. Waetjen is guilty of conflating the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and imputing to Abraham, whom he regards as the “seed of Christ,” the “fulfillment of the conditions” which belong to the Mosaic covenant. Assuming that Balch is correct, it’s still an open question as to how it affects Paul’s notion, according to Waetjen, that the Law of Moses is nullified in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ.

A final observation, which concerns what it means to say that becoming a new person in Christ is an eschatological reality. Balch cites Kaesemann’s criticism of Bultmann in his exegesis of Romans 6:7 and 2 Cor. 5:17 concerning the new life in Christ for not taking into consideration the apocalyptic/cosmic aspects of Paul’s gospel. Bultmann dodged this question by existentializing the “new life in Christ” as a “new self-understanding” which could take place in the here and now. There need be no question of an eschatological, apocalyptic future. The new life is here and now, albeit internal to the individual. This form of realized eschatology, however, would not sit well with Waetjen, whose definition of the new life in Christ is strongly social and ethical. This raises once again the question of the nature and timing of the establishment of God’s universal justice.