



Centennial Bible Study:

Expanding Minds

Session 1

Faith Transformed in Seeking Romans 11:33-12:2

Gathering

The university is a marketplace of ideas. Ask participants to share an idea or theory they encountered recently that was new to them, made them think, or inspired them.

Encounter the Word

Paul's Letter to the Romans has a special place in the Lutheran movement. Martin Luther's breakthrough in understanding God's righteousness occurred while lecturing on Psalms and Romans as Doctor of Bible. Righteousness isn't something God demands of us, but gives us as a gift. We are justified by grace through faith. God makes things right with us out of love for what God has created. We in campus ministry are proud to claim Luther as a campus pastor. Yet, Jaroslav Pelikan¹ notes Luther's responsibility as a university professor, not his roles as a monk and priest, led him to speak out in public. Luther's academic position provided some protection from theological and political opponents. He exercised a sixteenth century version of academic freedom as he reformed both theology and university education. The Reformation "started on campus."

Scholars universally agree that Paul is the author of Romans. The letter introduces Paul to the Christians in Rome, some of whom Paul knows from other cities. Paul hopes to visit the church in Rome on his way to Spain. The letter is written around A.D. 55-56. In the early church Jewish and Gentile Christians sometimes disagreed about what makes a person acceptable to God and how followers of Christ should live. Paul addresses the issue of justification in Romans chapters 1-8. In chapters 9-11 Paul looks at the mission to Gentiles and how it relates to the people of Israel. In chapters 12:1-15:13 Paul discusses life in the body of Christ and how Christians are to live with one another and the rest of the world.

As Romans 9:1-11:32 comes to an end, Paul reminds the Romans that God's Word has not failed; even though many Jews have rejected the "good news" about Jesus as Messiah and Lord, the Word is not finished. The Gentiles are called to recognize that God's ways and working are mysterious and never ending. They are to remain open to how God may manifest God's will in the future and expect to be surprised. All that is certain is that God remains faithful and merciful.

Engage and Reflect on the Word

Romans 11:33-34

Paul praises God's wonderful providence. What we know about God is only what God reveals to us. To imagine that we can fathom the depths of God is to posit a God too small. Paul asserts the infinite distance between human knowledge and God's action. Humans do not counsel God. They can only, in a sense, think God's thoughts after God. God is the source of all knowledge and wisdom (Isaiah 40:13; Proverbs 8:22-31; Job 38:2-39:30).

- Do you ever feel a sense of awe and wonder when you think about what God knows?

Romans 11:35

“Who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” Paul alludes to Job 35:7 and 41:11. The Creator has given all. We have no accomplishments with which to bargain or earn God’s favor. God can not be bribed or manipulated.

- Have you ever tried to bargain with God? What was the outcome?

Romans 11:36

Paul ends with words confessing faith in the true God and not in idols (cf. 1:21-23). God reaches out and makes himself known as trustworthy. God alone deserves our highest praise and adoration. Johann Sebastian Bach, perhaps best known among Lutherans as a church musician, was sometimes commissioned to compose music for secular occasions. But whether the composition was for worship or courtly entertainment, Bach usually signed his work S.D.G., an abbreviation for the Latin, *Soli Deo Gloria*, “to God alone the glory.”

- What does it mean to acknowledge that everything, including all knowledge and wisdom, is a gift from God? How does this perspective inform and influence your own studies and work? What would you think about signing S.D.G. at the end of all of your work?

Romans 12:1

This section follows from the earlier argument, especially in 3:21-8:39. “Bodies” means “selves,” but includes the physical space we occupy. “Living sacrifice” is contrasted with a dead or bloody sacrifice. “Holy and acceptable” are terms associated with animal sacrifice. “Spiritual worship” includes our worship as a community of faith, but also everything we do as Christians in the world. The whole of Christian life is to be worship.

“Spiritual” can also be translated “reasonable.” The New English Bible says, “worship offered by mind and heart.” It can also mean “for such is the worship that you as rational creatures should offer.” Thus, Paul emphasizes, we praise God according to our nature as rational human beings. Life becomes centered in the relationship with God.

Our new life in baptism is also in view here (cf. Philippians 4:18; 1 Peter 2:2, 5). True worship is not only when we pray or sing hymns or gather as a community of faith, it is everything we do in accordance with God’s will. Life *is* worship! We are both the sacrifice and the priest. We offer our whole lives, not only what we do in church or for the church, but our lives in the world as students, employees, friends, children, and roommates.

- Luther and the other reformers talked about the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:8). Have you ever thought of yourself as a sacrifice or a priest?

We are to go about our work, whatever it is, honoring God. Dutch painter, Jan Van Eyck (1390-1441) sometimes added a motto when he signed his work, “As best I can.” Some of his paintings push the limits of human vision; it takes a magnifying glass to see all the details. Seeing and painting with this degree of exactitude is an act of devotion for Van Eyck. As best he can Van Eyck shows us the all-seeing nature of God.

- What relationships do you see between God’s bodily self-giving in Christ for us and the church’s bodily service? In what ways is your life an offering to God? How can you, like Van Eyck, view the details of your study or work as worship? Is there a difference between a balanced life and a centered life? As Christians what does it mean to live a life centered in Christ?

Romans 12:2

“... but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” We’re not to be conformed to this age, but transformed in our minds. We can figure out what is good, what is acceptable, what is the will of God. Paul says Christians do not need to check their minds at the church door. How we think about the faith *is* important. It isn’t only a matter of warm feelings and heartfelt emotions. The writer Flannery O’Connor wrote, “Faith is not a big electric blanket, but the cross.”

- Marva Dawn, a contemporary Christian thinker entitled one of her books on worship, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*. Can you think of examples of “dumbing down” the faith in an attempt to make it more attractive or accessible to seekers?

- The motto for the United Negro College Fund is “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” How can this be true for Christians?

Jesus’ restatement of the first and great commandment was, “... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” Mark 12:30. The medieval theologian, Anselm, described thinking about the faith as “faith seeking understanding.”

- What does it mean to love God with our minds? How have you grown in your understanding of the Christian faith since beginning college? What questions about the faith excite, trouble, or confuse you?

- Frederick Buechner once described doubts as the “ants in the pants of faith.” What “ants” are keeping your faith awake and moving?

In the waters of baptism we are “transformed” from the old life, aeon, and world to the new one in Christ. Our minds are renewed (cf. Titus 3:5). The gift of the Holy Spirit empowers us with the capacity to measure reality differently than by the standards of the world. What God requires of us in a given situation is not always clear. God encourages and empowers us to discern “what is good and acceptable and perfect” in each situation. What pleases God may agree with what the world reasons as right, but Christians may also be led by their minds to choose a different way.

- Luther suggested remembering our baptism each morning as we wash our face. How can such remembering contribute to the renewing of our minds? How difficult is it to make decisions or choose a course of action at odds with peers or worldly wisdom?

In another letter Paul instructs his listeners, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

- As members of the body of Christ, we too are called to seek the peace and welfare of the campuses and communities where we are called to study (Jeremiah 29:7), rather than withdraw or isolate ourselves. How can you engage in the search for truth on your campus? How can that search lead you to make a positive difference? How can you live faithfully as a Christian within a university setting?

Closing

Sing or read the following hymn based on Proverbs 2:6 as a prayer. It can be sung to the familiar tune *Beach Spring*. It is also found with guitar chords in *Oremus III+*, page 103.

Praise the Source of Faith and Learning

Praise the source of faith and learning

Who has sparked and stoked the mind
With a passion for discerning
How the world has been designed.
Let the sense of wonder flowing
From the wonders we survey
Keep our faith forever growing
And renew our need to pray:

God of wisdom, we acknowledge

That our science and our art
And the breadth of human knowledge
Only partial truth impart.
Far beyond our calculation
Lies a depth we cannot sound
Where your purpose for creation
And the pulse of life are found.

May our faith redeem the blunder

Of believing that our thought
Has displaced the grounds for wonder
Which the ancient prophets taught.
May our learning curb the error
Which unthinking faith can breed
Lest we justify some terror
With an antiquated creed.

As two currents in a river

Fight each others' undertow
'Til converging they deliver
One coherent steady flow.
Blend, O God, our faith and learning
'Til they carve a single course
While they join as one returning
Praise and thanks to you their source.

May our faith redeem the blunder
Of believing that our thought
Has displaced the grounds for wonder
Which the ancient prophets taught.
May our learning curb the error
Which unthinking faith can breed
Lest we justify some terror
With an antiquated creed.

As two currents in a river
Fight each others' undertow
'Til converging they deliver
One coherent steady flow.
Blend, O God, our faith and learning
'Til they carve a single course
While they join as one returning
Praise and thanks to you their source.

Text: Thomas H. Troeger (born 1945)
© Oxford University Press, Inc.
Used by Permission. All rights reserved

An ancient practice of the church still in use is *lectio divina*, literally divine reading. It involves reading aloud in a slow, meditative manner. Choose a short passage of Scripture that stands out for you. Stop when you come to a word, phrase or verse that especially resonates with you. Then turn it over in your mind, seeking the ways in which it might encourage, challenge, or give you a new perspective. Use your imagination. Respond authentically and spontaneously as in a dialogue.

Study written by Timothy Spring, Campus Pastor at Montana State University

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 261.