

Introduction to Paul's Epistle to the Roman Christians

The significance of the impact of the epistle to the Romans within Christian history cannot be overemphasized. It is reported that John Chrysostom (c. A.D. 347-407), one of the early church fathers in Constantinople, had this epistle read to him once a week to keep him grounded in the Christian faith.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) credited the epistle to the Romans as instrumental in his conversion. Deeply convicted of his sinfulness, he was weeping under a fig tree one day, and heard a child singing, "Take up and read..." He picked up a Bible and read from Romans 13:13,14, "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." He submitted himself to God and became one of the great theologians of the early church, basing much of his theology on this epistle.

This epistle was instrumental in Martin Luther's (A.D. 1483-1546) personal change of theological perspective. He wrote,

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the justice of God,' because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what He meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressible sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven..."¹

In the "Preface" to his *Commentary on Romans*, Luther states,

"This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul."²

John Calvin certainly concurred in his statement, "If we have gained a true understanding of this epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture."³

Approximately two hundred years later a youthful John Wesley went to a meeting in London. Having struggled for years to attain righteousness by the performance of good works, Wesley commented about what happened that evening in his *Journal* of May 24, 1738:

"In the evening I went very unwilling to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's 'Preface' to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."⁴

Other authors and commentators have been just as profuse in their evaluations of the epistle to the Romans. Samuel T. Coleridge called it “one of the most profound books in existence.” F. Godet referred to Romans as “the greatest masterpiece which the human mind has ever conceived and realized,” calling it “the cathedral of the Christian faith.” F. B. Meyer regarded Romans as “the greatest and richest of all the apostolic works.” Jensen called Romans, “Paul’s masterpiece,” while Findlay referred to it as “Paul’s *magnum opus*.” Baxter regarded Romans as “the charter of evangelical Christianity,” and Griffith-Thomas stated, “A thorough study of this epistle is really a theological education in itself.” Godet was convinced, “the probability is that every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book.”⁵ Within the last century this has been demonstrated, for when the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth published his *The Epistle to the Romans* in 1919,⁶ it created a theological tsunami that overwhelmed the theological liberalism of continental Europe in the twentieth century.

The impact of this letter upon the history of Christianity has been phenomenal. Perhaps more than any other portion of scripture, the epistle to the Romans has sparked revelation and renewal in the church of Jesus Christ.

Interpretive Principle

Prior to commencing the study of the epistle, it is important to share a basic hermeneutic principle of interpretation that is essential for the study of scripture. It is only fair that any author expose his presuppositions.

Christianity is a faith that has historical foundation. Christian adherence is not just an ethereal whim. Christian belief is not spiritualized superstition. Christianity is an historically founded faith. The Christian scriptures are historical documents. They were written by different people in different places at different points in time, and in differing historical contexts. To understand them we must attempt to reconstruct the historical context as best we can. They have to be “plugged in” to history.

My first hermeneutic presupposition for the interpretation of scripture is, therefore, “It cannot mean *now*, what it did not mean *then*,” – or else it can mean anything to anyone; it can mean anything anyone wants it to mean; in which case it is meaningless – and has no objective meaning. Without historical contextualization a document can be used to bolster and support any preexisting opinion that anyone has. It becomes a malleable instrument of “proof texting,” used to support anything anyone wants to offer or defend. Such “fluid interpretation” is the mish-mash of mystic religion.

The statement, “Scripture cannot mean *now*, what it did not mean *then*,” refers to general exegesis and interpretation. This should not be taken to imply that the Spirit of God cannot personally speak to an individual Christian via the scriptures and bring “personal revelation” as to what God wants to do in that person’s life. Such personal enlightenment can take place apart from the context – historical and textual. But the Christian individual does not have any right to take a personal revelation of application and apply that to any other Christian individual by asserting that this is the intended meaning of the text. It must not be regarded as the legitimate interpretation of Scripture for all Christians.

The legitimate biblical exegete and commentator must first be a student of history. This epistle to the Roman Christians is an historical document. It did not appear out of thin air, “poof,” by an angelic messenger from the Divine Delivery Service. It is imperative that we explore every avenue, turn every stone, to ascertain the historical situation in which any biblical document was written. This letter was not created in a vacuum; it has a context in history. Historical context is the first and foremost contextualization that must be determined before we can interpret scripture properly. What is the *sitz im leben* – the “setting in life” – that prompted and defines this writing?

Failure to recognize that there is a specific situation being addressed as Paul wrote this letter, and failure to attempt to reconstruct the historical context to the extent that we are able to do so, has allowed interpreters of this epistle to paint with a broad-brush of generalized meaning. Those who have failed to consider the historical context have often regarded this epistle as a general summary of Paul’s teaching compiled in a theological treatise or tractate. Such a “generalized” approach allows interpreters to read and interpret this epistle through the lens of their own theological understanding – making it mean whatever they want it to mean, in accord with the theological presuppositions they bring to it.

This is what has been taking place for almost five hundred years now in the Protestant interpretation of this epistle of Paul to the Roman Christians. The historical and theological issues of the sixteenth century Reformation have been read into the text of Romans (creating *eisegeis* rather than *exegetis*). The Reformation motto and meaning of “justification by faith” has been imposed upon Paul’s comments to the Christians in Rome in the first century. So, for almost five hundred years the interpretation of Romans has been colored and tainted by Reformation theology, because it was regarded as a generalized theological treatise that supported the Protestant issues raised in the sixteenth century ecclesial conflict with the Roman church.

It is imperative that we consider this epistle in the context of the history of the first century in which it was written – to understand what was going on in Rome.

General History of Rome

The history of Rome goes back to the earliest days of civilization. Rome is so old, that it is referred to as “the eternal city.” From the seventh or eighth century B.C., Rome was governed by kings, during the period of the “Roman Monarchy.”

After seven ruling kings, the Roman citizens took power over their own city to rule themselves. This period is known as the period of the “Roman Republic,” when the Romans had a council, known as the “senate,” to provide rule over them. The senate appointed a consul who ruled Rome for a period of one year, at which time his leadership could be extended or ended. The Roman republic was a successful form of government, lasting approximately 500 years from 510 – 27 B.C.

Rome had four classes of citizens. (1) Slaves – owned by others, and having no rights. (2) Plebeians – free persons, but with little influence. (3) Equestrians or “knights” who were given a horse to ride if they were called to fight for Rome. (4) Patricians or nobles – those who exercised the real power in the republic.

Julius Caesar was a Roman patrician and general. To prove himself, he conquered the vast territory of the Gauls in France. In 49 B.C. Caesar crossed the river Rubicon into

Italy and engaged in civil war against Pompey, conquering Rome itself to rule as dictator. He was infamously murdered by Brutus in the senate in Rome.

Then began third major period of Roman history, that of the “Roman Empire” (27 B.C. to AD 476). During this period, Rome was governed by emperors. The first five emperors were Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

Since this particular letter deals with Christians in Rome – both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians – we need to ask some questions, and do some historical research. What is the background of Jews and Christians in Rome? How did a Jewish population develop in Rome? How and when did Christians arrive and begin to live in Rome?

While Rome was still a Republic – before Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River – Pompey had conquered Palestine and brought a large number of Jewish captives back to Rome. Most of these were subsequently emancipated and allowed to meet together for their Jewish worship on the Sabbath. After Julius Caesar took control by defeating Pompey (49-45 B.C.), he allowed the Jews to continue to meet. Josephus reports that 8000 Roman Jews supported the petition against Archelaus in 4 B.C. In A.D. 19 the emperor Tiberius considered the Roman Jews to be a threat and ordered their expulsion from Rome, but later allowed them to return. Philo reported that by A.D. 38, “the great section of Rome on the other side of the Tiber is occupied and inhabited by Jews, most of whom were Roman citizens emancipated.”⁷ Jewish people comprised such a large contingent that when Claudius became emperor in A.D. 41, he withdrew their right of assembly. During this time the Jews went into the catacombs of Rome, where it appears there were 10-13 major synagogue groups meeting regularly. By the middle of the first century A.D. it is estimated that there were 40-50 thousand Jews living in Rome.

How did Christianity get settled in Rome? Christian assemblies usually emerged out of the Jewish community. Jesus was a Jew, and there were some Jews who accepted him as the promised Messiah, and some who did not. The statement in Acts 2:10 indicates that some of those present on Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover when Jesus was crucified, were Romans - “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.” In Acts 6:9 there is reference to a “synagogue of the *libertini*” (freedmen), which may have included Roman Jews enslaved under Pompey but now emancipated and residing to Palestine. Gentiles were often attracted to the moral character of Judaism, and associated themselves as “God-fearers” or “God-worshippers.” The freedom of travel in the Roman Empire often brought people to the capital in Rome, so the natural migration of Jewish and Gentile Christians from throughout the Roman Empire for the previous twenty-five years could have added to the Christian congregations in Rome, which appear to have existed for “many years” (15:23; 1:13).

There seems to have been a major presence of Jews and Christians in Rome by the middle of the first century. Suetonius, a Roman historian, reports that in A.D. 49 the emperor Claudius “expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,”⁸ (which likely refers to Christ). The Roman government regarded Christians as but a sect of Judaism, and was fed up with the riotous disturbances among the group concerning Jesus as Messiah (a not uncommon occurrence – cf. Acts 13:50; 14:19; 17:5; 19:23). Prisca and Aquila were apparently Jewish Christians were had to leave Rome because of Claudius’ expulsion (Acts 18:2), and came to Corinth. When Emperor Claudius died in A.D. 54, his decree of expulsion would have been voided at that time, allowing Jews and Jewish Christians to return to Rome.

During the period of the expulsion of Jewish Christians from Rome, the Gentile Christians would have continued their meetings. This allowed for a clearer distinguishing between the Jewish faith and the Christian faith. When large numbers of Jewish Christians began to return to Rome after A.D. 54, this undoubtedly caused some frictions. The Gentile Christians no longer felt compelled to abide by some of the Jewish scruples of food laws (cf. Rom. 14), sabbatarian laws, etc. In fact, when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome (A.D. 55-57), it appears that the Gentile Christians might have been the majority in the Roman house churches. The Christian community was developing an identity distinct from the Jewish community. By A.D. 64, during the Neronian persecution, Tacitus reports that Christians in Rome were an “immense multitude.”

There is not any historical evidence that Peter founded the Christian church in Rome, as was later taught by the Roman Catholic Church. There is no reference to the apostle Peter in this epistle to the Roman Christians. It is likely, however, that Peter did visit Rome at a later date, and tradition appears to be accurate that both he and Paul died in Rome. Ambrosiaster (4th century) indicated that Christianity began in Rome among the Jews, and that without the presence of any apostles: “The Romans have embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, without seeing any sign of mighty works or any of the apostles.”⁹

The Authorship of the Epistle

As was customary in first century correspondence practices, the author identifies himself in the very first word of the letter. The text begins with the author’s name, “Paul,” and then proceeds to explain that he is “a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1). All the criteria of external and internal evidence serve to verify Pauline authorship. In the past some skeptical critics challenged Pauline authorship of this epistle, but C.E.B. Cranfield explained that these can be “rightly relegated to a place among the curiosities of New Testament scholarship,” and “today no responsible criticism disputes its Pauline origin.”¹⁰

What do we know about Paul? Paul himself explained, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, educated at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). In this epistle, he states, “I am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin” (Rom. 11:1). Born outside of the Palestinian homeland of Judaism, Saul (his birth name means “asked of God”) was being prepared from his birth for the dual worlds he would be called to minister within. From birth he enjoyed the privilege of Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-28), but his religious identity was undoubtedly formed by his Jewish parentage and ethnicity. Though residing in the context of the Gentile culture of Tarsus, he would have been educated in the strictest Hebrew curriculum. As a young adult, he was sent to Jerusalem to study “at the feet of Gamaliel,” a wise teacher of the Law (Acts 5:34), who served on the Jewish Sanhedrin or Council, the high court for the determination of Jewish Law. Saul must have been a keen student and well-versed in Jewish Law according to the strict interpretation of the Pharisees (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5; Gal. 1:14). He was apparently being groomed for an eventual position in the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism.

The first biblical mention of Saul is in the narrative of the stoning of Stephen. After Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin and defended Jesus as the Messiah, the Jewish leaders became incensed, drove him out of the city, and “laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58; 22:20) as they began to stone Stephen to death. Soon thereafter the zealous young Saul actively joined in the persecution of those identified with Jesus (Acts 8:3; 9:1,13,21; 22:4,19; 26:10,11; I Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13,23; Phil. 3:6), convinced he was protecting and preserving the faith of God’s “chosen people” (cf. Gal. 1:14).

While pursuing Christians as far away as Damascus, Saul had a traumatic conversion experience (Acts 9:3-8; 22:6-11; 26:12-18). A heavenly light struck him down, and the living Lord Jesus asked, “Why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:3; 22:7; 26:14). Responding to this “heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19), Saul believed in Jesus and was baptized, thereupon receiving his commission to share the gospel with the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:16-18). To be the “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13) required Saul to completely reorient his perspective of God’s redemptive purposes in His Son, Jesus Christ. This reeducation was facilitated by a three-year stint in the wilderness of Arabia (Gal. 1:17,18), where the Spirit of Christ taught him the implications of the gospel (Gal. 1:12). When he returned to Jerusalem proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, he was at great risk of being killed by the Jewish leaders who felt he had betrayed his ancestral faith, so the leaders of the Jerusalem church sent him away to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). There in his old hometown, he developed his skills in sharing the gospel in a Gentile culture.

When a predominantly Gentile church began to develop in Antioch of Syria, Barnabas (cf. Acts 4:36) was sent from Jerusalem to evaluate the situation. He remembered Saul, and went to Tarsus to find him and bring him to Antioch. After ministering together for a year (Acts 11:26), the church at Antioch commissioned Saul and Barnabas for a missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3).

In the midst of Luke’s account of this first missionary journey, he records that “Saul was also known as Paul” (Acts 13:9), a name that means “little,” and probably referred to his physical stature. An early Christian writer described Paul as “a man of little stature, thin haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace...”¹¹ Even Paul admitted to the Corinthians that people regarded “his personal presence as unimpressive” (II Cor. 10:10). The little Jewish lawyer was a “hardy soul,” however, when it came to physical endurance, for he was beaten, stoned, robbed, shipwrecked, and exposed to all forms of danger (cf. II Cor. 6:4,5; 10:23-27), but was convinced that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ (8:35,36).

The dissension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians soon became an issue as Paul was true to his calling to be an “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13). In his earliest letter to the Galatians, he is adamant that the grace dynamic of the gospel should not be supplanted or supplemented with performance demands of the Jewish Law. Ever cognizant of his Jewish heritage, and always having a heart to share the gospel with his “kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3), he went “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). His desire was always for a conciliatory unity of Christians without ethnic distinction: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, ...for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

On two subsequent missionary journeys Paul established predominantly Gentile churches throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. His letters to these churches reveal the constant internecine conflict between Christians of Jewish and Gentile heritage. The recipients of his letters admitted they were “weighty and strong” (II Cor. 10:10), for Paul never “pulled any punches” in his insistence on the irrelevance of ethnic differences and religious backgrounds for those participating in the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus. Even the apostle Peter admitted that Paul’s writings were “hard to understand” (II Peter 3:15,16).

When Paul prepared to write this letter to the Romans Christians, he was at a major transition point in his missionary endeavors. He was convinced that he had completed his church-planting ministry in the region of the eastern Mediterranean. “From Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (15:19) he reports, “but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain, I hope to see you in passing” (15:23). Nearing the end of his third missionary journey, probably sometime between A.D. 55 and 57, Paul had one last project he needed to complete, that being the delivery to Jerusalem of the collection he had been receiving from the churches he had founded (cf. I Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor. 8:1-9:15) in order to assist “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (15:26). In Paul’s mind this was no doubt a practical expression of showing the unity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, which often seemed to be fracturing as the distinctive of the Jewish religion and the Christian faith was progressively made clearer. Luke records that Paul spent three months in Greece (Acts 20:2,3), probably Corinth, before he was obliged to depart, retrace his steps, and carry the contribution from the Gentile Christians to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Though not recorded in the text of the epistle itself, it was likely during those three months of residence in Corinth that Paul wrote this epistle to the Roman Christians. Four observations lend support to this suggested location of the origin of this epistle. {1} Paul commended “our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea” (16:1,2). Cenchrea was the southern seaport for the Corinthian isthmus. Perhaps Phoebe was already intending to travel to Rome, and was asked to serve as the courier of this letter. {2} Paul mentioned that he was staying with Gaius. “Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you” (16:23). This Gaius, whose home served as Paul’s lodging and perhaps the meeting place of the church in Corinth, was probably the same Gaius that Paul recalls having baptized in Corinth (I Cor. 1:14) on the second missionary journey. {3} Paul sent greetings from “Erastus, the city treasurer (16:23). Archaeological evidence has confirmed that there was an individual named Erastus who served as a city councilman in Corinth during that period of time. {4} Paul’s mention of Timothy, his fellow-worker, being with him at the time of writing (16:21) coincides with Luke’s record of Timothy’s accompaniment of Paul when he left Corinth on the third missionary journey (Acts 20:4). Together, these internal evidences give convincing credence to the thesis that Paul wrote this epistle to the Roman Christians while residing in Corinth. Tertius served as his amanuensis or scribe for the writing of the epistle (16:22).

After leaving Corinth in the midst of an assassination plot by the Jews (Acts 20:3), Paul was warned of the consequences of going to Jerusalem (Acts 21:11). He could not be dissuaded (Acts 21:13,14), and went back to the capital of Judea where he had

received his Jewish training in the Law to deliver the contribution to the Jewish Christians. Dragged out of the temple by a Jewish mob intent on killing him, Paul was rescued by the Roman officials. They were about to scourge him with whips for the purpose of interrogation when he used the “trump card” of his lifelong Roman citizenship to avoid such. Later using his Roman privilege to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11), his objective of traveling to Rome was facilitated at the expense of the Roman government (cf. Acts 27:1–28:16).

The Recipients of this Epistle

Paul addresses this letter “to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints” (1:7), expressing his eagerness to “preach the gospel to you who are in Rome” (1:15). Although the destination phrase, “in Rome,” is omitted from a few later manuscripts, as are the personal references of the sixteenth chapter, this is probably accounted for by the fact that the letter was copied in order to be read in all of the churches, and certain scribes decided that these details were not needed in the subsequent general copies.

There were probably a number of house churches scattered throughout the large metropolis of Rome. It is obvious from the content of Paul’s directive that these assemblies were comprised of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, for Paul addresses both groups. Whether all of the fellowships were integrated, or whether some were polarized into segregated ethnic particularity, we do not know.

Scholars have long debated whether the Christians in Rome were predominantly Jewish or Gentile believers. Older scholarship favored the predominance of Jewish Christians, while newer scholarship suggests that the Gentile Christians predominated. The question of which ethnic group was most populous is of negligible importance, though Paul does seem to have more to say to the Gentile Christians than to the Jewish Christians in the body of the letter, perhaps because the Gentile Christians did not suffer the disadvantage of being expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius, as did the Jewish Christians who were still in the process of returning to Rome.

To the Jewish Christians, Paul explains that there is no advantage to being a Jew or claiming the Law if the righteous character of God is not exhibited in their behavior (2:1–3:8). Righteousness is not reckoned on the basis of the Mosaic Law, but on having faith like Abraham (3:31–4:22). Jewish Christians are no longer married to the Law, but to the risen Lord Jesus (7:1–13). The Law was inadequate to fulfill righteousness, but the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is fully sufficient (8:3,4). In an extended appeal, Paul admits that his kinsmen according to the flesh have failed to pursue righteousness as God intended, but they are not rejected and can still receive God’s grace through Jesus Christ (9:1–11:12).

To the Gentile Christians, identifies himself as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (1:5,13,16; 11:13; 15:16,18). He explains that when Gentiles exhibit righteousness it is evidence that the work of the Law is written in their hearts (2:12–16). The God of the Jews is the God of the Gentiles (3:29,30), and the Gentiles are not to repudiate the Jews, but to recognize that the Gentiles have been grafted onto God’s tree (11:12–32). In a string of Old Testament quotations, Paul reminds the readers of God’s intent to be praised by the Gentiles (15:8–19).

The recipients of this epistle were a mixture of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians meeting in house churches throughout the capital city of Rome. Inasmuch as Christianity found its fertile ground in the synagogues of Judaism, the abundance of quotations from the Old Testament and the many references to the Law would have been equally understandable both to Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul was well acquainted with the situation of the Christians in Rome, noting that their “faith was being proclaimed throughout the world” (1:8), and “the report of their obedience had reached to all” (15:19). Perhaps his friends, Prisca and Aquila (15:3; Acts 18:2), kept him informed after they returned to Rome.

The Purpose of this Epistle

Why did Paul write this epistle? What was the primary objective for writing it? The purpose and major theme of the epistle have long been debated.

Paul’s church-planting ministry had not founded the Christian congregations in Rome. Perhaps he felt a responsibility, since he was the “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13), to provide some apostolic oversight to this group of Christians who had apparently spontaneously generated in Rome. “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (1:5), he writes in the introduction. His emphasis on his apostleship (1:1,5; 11:13) appears to some as a *personal justification* of his ministry. His reputation for diminishing the importance of the Law was known far and wide, and Paul defends himself against antinomianism, admitting that slanderous reports were circulating that he was advocating, “Let us do evil that good may come” (3:8; 6:1). The primary purpose of the epistle does not appear to be self-justification, however.

Many Protestant commentators have suggested that Paul had an *apologetic purpose* to write out a “last will and testament” of his theology. They speculate that Paul was laying out the essentials of the gospel in a compendium of Christian doctrine, which formed a theological treatise or tractate. Paul, the “little lawyer,” definitely had a logical mind and was very adept at systematically presenting his argument, but the composition of a theological treatise does not appear to be Paul’s primary purpose. This is a personal epistle to a specific community addressing particular issues on a specific occasion. When this epistle is generalized as a theological document apart from its particular historical context, it is generally misused eisegetically to promulgate the interpreter’s theological biases and theories. The Protestant reformers used the epistle to the Roman Christians to justify their emphasis on “justification by faith.” Their presuppositions, however, were colored by the ecclesial situation of the sixteenth century, and by an overly objectified understanding of justification in a legal, forensic, and juridical context. This has, unfortunately, been the lens through which much Protestant interpretation has viewed the message of this epistle for almost five hundred years.

Because Paul was foremost a missionary, and only secondarily a theologian, many have focused on the conclusion of this epistle to propose a purpose of *missionary support*. Convinced that he had completed his church-planting ministry in the Eastern Mediterranean, “from Jerusalem to Illyricum” (15:19), Paul was desirous of “preaching the gospel to those who had not heard” (15:20,21), as far west as Spain (15:24,28). Perhaps he envisioned Rome as the sending-station for missionary activity to the western

frontier of the Mediterranean, in similar manner as Antioch had served as such for his eastern Mediterranean endeavors. Whether his objective for a Spanish mission was every achieved, we do not know.

When the particular historical and cultural situation of the Roman Christians is taken into account, the primary purpose of this epistle is best understood as a *plea for unity* among the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. The interpretive fulcrum for this epistle is not ecclesial and theological conflict as was imposed upon this epistle by the Reformation of the sixteenth century, but the ethnic conflict of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome in the first century. The pernicious and perennial problem of ethnic and religious differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians was constantly present during the developing distinction between Judaism and the Christian faith during the first century. The cultural climate of first century Rome compounded the racial tensions, for anti-Semitism was prevalent, as evidenced by at least two previous expulsions of Jewish people from Rome, the most recent by Claudius (A.D. 49) just a few years prior to the writing of this letter.

In the Christian house churches of Rome the Jewish sense religious conservation and pride was pitted against the Gentile sense of progress. The Jewish Christians needed to understand that there was no legitimate claim for Jewish exclusivism, superiority, or priority of privilege. The performance particular elements of the Mosaic Law were not the normative basis of Christian life. The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, needed to understand that they could not jettison the Law in an emphasis on grace that led to antinomianism. They could not arrogantly insist on the “newness” of the gospel to the extent that they failed to recognize the historical heritage of the old covenant.

Pleading for Christian unity, Paul explains that “there is no partiality with God” (2:11), for “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all” (10:12). “The God of the Jews is the God of the Gentiles” (3:29). Paul encourages every person “not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think” (12:3), for they are all “one Body” in Christ with different functions (12:4-8), and must “love one another” (12:9,10; 13:8-10). They needed to accept their differences in areas of conscience and scruples (14:1-23), and “be of the same mind with one another” (15:5), by “accepting one another as Christ accepted them” (15:7). Paul’s desire was that the Jewish and Gentile Christians could “with one voice glorify the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ” (15:6), and “the God of peace would crush Satan under their feet” (16:20).

Paul’s basis for Christian unity was not an eclectic ecumenism based on a tolerant trade-off of convictions. Rather, Christian unity must be founded on the commonality that all Christians have by the indwelling presence of the dynamic life of the living Lord Jesus, constituting them in the “one Body of Christ” (cf. Eph. 2:11–3:12; Col. 1:18-27), wherein they are beyond all ethnic differences (cf. Gal. 3:28). The avoidance of the divisive *ethnocentrism* that had developed among the Christians in Rome could only be overcome by an emphasis on *Christocentrism* that recognized the centrality of the living Christ in their lives and in their fellowship.

So, the major theme of Paul’s epistle to the Roman Christians, like that of all his epistles, is the Christocentric gospel of grace that focuses on the living Lord Jesus whose presence and function resolves whatever problems present themselves. To the Galatians, Paul explained that the understanding of the Christocentric gospel of grace would prevent them from being led astray by the Judaizers and their insistence on the Law performance

of circumcision. To the Corinthians, Paul advised that the Christocentric gospel of grace would overcome the competitive spirit of comparing “spirituality” (cf. I Cor. 1), and allow them to recognize the religious methodology that was masquerading for Christian ministry (cf. II Cor.). Now, Paul encourages the Roman Christians to allow the Christocentric gospel of grace in Jesus Christ to prevent the ethnic internecine conflict and enable the righteous character of God to result in Christian unity. Such a Christ-centered gospel (1:1,9,15,16; 2:16; 15:16,19,20; 16:25) facilitates the Christian unity that is so necessary to the Christian witness (cf. John 17:21,23) that was always the motivating factor in Paul’s missionary heart (1:5,15,16; 15:18-21; 16:25,26).

The Structure of this Epistle

This epistle, the longest of Paul’s writings in the New Testament (7101 words), has a natural flow of thought as Paul expounds how the Christocentric gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ applies to the situation among the Jewish and Gentiles Christians of Rome.

Paul provides a thematic summary for this epistle at the end of his introduction (1:16,17). *“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”* Paul is unashamed to proclaim that the gospel is the “good news” of the dynamic life of Jesus Christ who can restore God’s presence in mankind. *“It is the power of God for salvation...”* The gospel, which is Christ, is the divine dynamic whereby man is “made safe” to function as God intended by restoring God’s presence in mankind. *“To everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* The gospel, which is Christ, is available to everyone who will receive Him by faith, without any distinction of racial ethnicity. *“In it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.”* In the gospel, which is Christ, the righteous character of God is revealed from the initial receptivity of Christ’s life by faith to the continued receptivity of His life in Christian behavior. *“As it is written, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’”* As Habakkuk prophesied, the righteous man of God shall receive Christ’s life by faith, and shall live in the behavioral manifestation of righteous character by faithful receptivity.

A simple outline of the epistle might be developed:

- I. Introduction – 1:1-17
- II. Doctrinal – 1:18–8:39
- III. National – 9:1–11:36
- IV. Practical – 12:1–15:13
- V. Conclusion – 15:14–16:27

The doctrinal section (1:18–8:39) contains a progressive exhortation of the Christocentric gospel as it reveals the restoration of all mankind. The national section (9:1–11:36) states a particular explanation of the Christocentric gospel as it relates to Israel. The practical section (12:1–15:13) shares a practical application of the Christocentric gospel and how it renovates Christian behavior.

When the Protestant reformers and commentators focused on the theme of “justification by faith” in the first five chapters of this epistle, they did a great disservice to the Christian understanding of Paul’s epistle to the Roman Christians. Their excessive

theologizing of chapters 1-5 in the context of legal presuppositions of being “imputed righteous” and “declared righteous” by the divine and heavenly Judge, tended to disallow any subjective implications of being “made righteous” by the indwelling presence of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. The result has been to *idealize* the behavioral manifestation of righteousness in the Christian by the Spirit of Christ in chapters 6-8, to mistakenly *marginalize* the references to Israel in chapters 9-11 as but a parenthetical excursus, and to *generalize* the practical behavioral admonitions of chapters 12-15 by allowing them to be viewed as performance standards of the Christian life. There is a great need to recognize the integral connection of every part of this epistle as it relates to the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome that could only be effected by the dynamic character of righteousness manifested by the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Every commentator must approach this epistle of Paul to the Roman Christians with the utmost of respect, regarding this as a portion of God’s inspired scripture, and therefore “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (II Tim. 3:16). In like manner as John Calvin sought to comment on scripture with “lucid brevity,” the author desires to bring forth the intended meaning of this epistle with succinct precision and clarity of thought, giving due consideration to its historical context by constantly recognizing that, “It cannot mean *now*, what it did not mean *then*.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Luther, Martin, as cited by Brian Morgan, Discovery Publishing. 1988.
- 2 Luther, Martin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, “Preface.” Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing. 1977. pg. xiii.
- 3 Calvin, John, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. “Dedicatory.” Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1996. pg. xxiv.
- 4 Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley*. Journals. Vol. I. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1978. pg. 103.
- 5 Godet, Frederick L., *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1970. pg. 1.
- 6 Barth, Karl, *The Epistle to the Romans*. London: Oxford University Press. 1968.
- 7 Philo, *The Works of Philo*. “On the Embassy of Gaius,” Para. 155. Hendriksen Publishers. 1997. pg. 771.
- 8 Seutonius. *Life of Claudius*. 25:4
- 9 Ambrosiaster, This text can be found in *Patrologia Latina* 17, col. 46.
- 10 Cranfield, C.E.B., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Series: The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T & T Clark Limited. 1977. Vol. I. Pg. 2.
- 11 Unknown, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Cf. Barrier, Jeremy W., *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990.