

TO THE CHURCH IN ROME

A COMMENTARY ON
PAUL'S GREATEST
EPISTLE



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INTRODUCTION



The book of Romans is a mountain range full of gold, and down through Church history it has been the location of more than one or two gold rushes. So many have been attracted to this mountain range over the centuries that entire denominational cities have been built there—with some of them even forgetting the gold beneath their feet, busy as they have been with importing modernist tinsel. Charles Hodge says somewhere that if it is true, it is not new, and that if it is new, it is not true.

*As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way...*

At the same time, I would like to supplement what Hodge observed by saying that if our teaching about the grace of

God in the gospel is both true and ancient, then it should also be *fresh*. The truth is certainly ancient, from before eternal times, but it is never stale.

Readers who follow recent theological currents will recognize that a “silent interlocutor” throughout the book is a movement that has come to be called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). This is a movement that needs to be taken seriously in some of the questions it raises, but needs to be summarily dismissed with regard to others. Readers who are acquainted with the NPP will instantly recognize some of what is going on, but familiarity with that theological debate is not a prerequisite for grasping what I am seeking to set forward here.

This commentary initially began as a series of sermons for the saints at Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. That series began in 2008, but since that time the outlines have been sandpapered a good bit until they showed up in this present form. But the fact that the genesis of this book was sermonic accounts for some of the tone and structure in what follows. As a consequence, this commentary may seem a bit more conversational than other commentaries, including even some of the other commentaries I have written.

It may be a help to the reader here if I give a broad structural outline of what is coming. This is more of a sketched-out roadmap than anything else, with details to follow. Think of the epistle to the Romans as divided into three broad sections. The first is where Paul sets out the gospel that he preaches, which would be chapters 1 through 5. The second section, 6 through 11, would be the Q & A session in the back of the synagogue. In this section, Paul

is anticipating and answering objections to the gospel that he preaches. In chapters 12 through 15, he gives practical teaching on Christian living, and concludes with his greetings in chapter 16.

DOUGLAS WILSON

CHAPTER 1



The book of Romans is a first-century apostolic fundraising letter, and the fact that it almost never strikes us this way simply demonstrates how divergent our practices are from the biblical practices. The Apostle Paul was seeking to minister in Spain, and he wanted the help of the Roman church. Modern fundraising tends toward a “blood on the envelope” approach. “Unless you send in twenty-five dollars now, our ministry will fail and our children will all starve.” Paul’s approach was much more responsible—so responsible, in fact, that many modern readers don’t realize that it was a fundraising letter. Because he wanted help in bringing the gospel to Spain, he laid out the gospel as he understood it, in the spirit of full disclosure. This is why he determined to set before them a clear statement of

the gospel as he preached it, so that they would know the nature of the ministry they were helping out, if in fact they decided to help out.

A GOSPEL FOR ALL NATIONS

Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company. (Rom. 15:24)

THE BACKGROUND TO ROMANS

The letter to the Romans was likely written from Corinth. There are various reasons for thinking this, but the most they can do is establish a likelihood. Phoebe was a servant of the church at Cenchreae (right next to Corinth), and she is the one who delivered this letter to the Romans (Rom. 16:1). Paul identifies Gaius as his host (Rom. 16:23), and if this is the same Gaius of 1 Corinthians 1:14, then that would be suggestive. Erastus is mentioned in Romans 16:23, and a gent named Erastus remained in Corinth (2 Tim. 4:20). The KJV says that this Erastus was a “chamberlain,” although we might render it as a steward or a treasurer. At any rate there was an important city official named Erastus in the first century, and an inscription that likely refers to him has been uncovered there.

Paul likely wrote this letter in the mid-fifties. Seneca was a Stoic philosopher who served as a tutor to the emperor Nero. Despite the awful name he garnered later, Nero was fairly decent for the first five years of his reign, which began in AD 54. Gallio was Seneca’s brother, and he became

proconsul of Achaia in AD 51 or 52. As you recall, Paul was hauled in front of Gallio in Acts 18:12–17, but Gallio refused to hear the case. In the next chapter, Paul establishes a very fruitful ministry in the Hall of Tyrannus at Ephesus, where he teaches for two years. Immediately after this is the first mention of wanting to visit Rome (Acts 19:21–22). This seems to be the most likely context for the letter.

Although Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), there is no record of him ever visiting Rome before this. He wanted to minister in Spain, and Rome was on the way. This gave him the perfect opportunity to visit Rome and to make the acquaintance of the Christians there. At the same time, he had no desire to usurp the ministry of others, no desire to build on another man's foundation (Rom. 15:20).

The church in Rome was established in the capital city of the empire, and all the temptations you might expect came with that privilege. Paul was acutely aware of this, and he warns the Roman Christians of these temptations discreetly but very clearly. And he does so in a way that is woven together with his larger argument. There had been “visitors from Rome” present in Jerusalem at the first Pentecost, so a church had likely been established in Rome very early.

Priscilla and Aquila had been part of this early Roman church, and Paul befriended them when the Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius (c. AD 49). Suetonius (seventy years later) said that this was because the Jews were constantly rioting at the instigation of a man named *Chrestus*, a variant Latin spelling of *Christus*. But if this referred to Christ, it would be odd for the Jews in Rome

at the end of Acts not to know anything about this “sect” (Acts 28:22).

At any rate, after the death of Claudius in AD 54, there was a thriving Jewish Christian community in Rome, and when Paul wrote in 57, he could speak of the faith of the Roman church as a matter of universal knowledge (Rom. 1:8). In short, Rome was a happening place.

AN OVERVIEW OF ROMANS

Most of Paul’s letters are pastoral responses to particular situations on the ground. Of necessity, this means that his teaching in the bulk of his letters is, generally speaking, *ad hoc*. But in this letter, he does not have particular pastoral responsibilities in Rome, and he is not responding to any particular crisis. Rather, he has the opportunity to go to Spain, and so he is setting forth his gospel as clearly as he can. The result is that the book of Romans is far more systematic than most of his other writings.

In taking an overview of the book here, we have to pass over a number of nooks and crannies, but we will address those as we proceed through the book. So take this as the *broad* overview, and remember that the original book did not have chapters and verses.

In the first chapter, Paul shows that the nations are trapped in sin. But lest the Jews vaunt themselves, in the second chapter, he shows that they are under the authority of sin as well. In the third chapter, he summarizes his point by showing that Jew and Gentile are both in bondage to sin. They both have the same dilemma. Thus far we have

CHAPTER 2



THE SPIRIT OF ACCUSATION

God's wrath is taught very clearly in Scripture. Our great problem with it is that we confound it with a spirit of accusation that belongs to the devil, and we show that we do not understand how righteousness—the *real* thing—interacts with sin. We think we know, but we tend to know only how *self*-righteousness would deal with unrighteousness.

Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which

commit such things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; (Rom. 2:1–5)

Having indicted the entire Gentile world, the Apostle Paul turns to the Jews. This is seen in the judgments he describes as delivered against pagan practices in the first part of this chapter, but then it is made explicit in v. 17. “Behold, thou art called a Jew...”

But it is interesting that as he does so, addressing those who would *approve* of his treatment of the Gentiles in chapter one, he speaks to them as “O *man*” (vv. 1, 3). His point in the second chapter is that you Jews have the same problem with sin, “you are *men* after all,” and you have compounded all of it with the hypocrisy of a double standard. The Gentile pagan looking at the stars was “without excuse” (1:20). In the same way, this one who would judge the Gentiles is also inexcusable (2:1). Why? Because he does the same sorts of things himself. But the judgment of God rests on those who *do* such things (v. 2), and it is not possible to avert that judgment simply because you disapprove of them on paper or because your sacred Torah condemns them. Do you really think, O man, that it is okay with God that you judge those who do such things while

CHAPTER 3



BEGIN WITH THE CONCLUSION

We learned from the end of chapter two that not all Jews are Jews along with the corollary that not all Christians are Christians. But keeping up with the apostle can be a strenuous effort sometimes, and we now learn in the first part of chapter three that the Jews who are not really Jews are, nevertheless...Jews. And the same goes double for Christians.

What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make

the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. (Rom. 3:1–4)

Chapter two concludes with Paul offering the definition of the true Jew, the inward Jew. But now, without missing a beat, he returns to the conventional use of the word *Jew*. It is as though he is asking that if a bunch of Jews aren't really Jewish, then what good does it do them being Jewish? We would say, having thought we got his point, "Well, no good at all." But what does he say? "Much every way" (v. 2). The chief reason there is profit in external circumcision (the kind of Jewishness he is talking about *now*) is that the externally circumcised were entrusted with the oracles of God, the Scriptures (v. 2). Some did not believe, and Paul responds to that with a *So what?* Can the unbelief of covenant members undo the covenant? No way (v. 3). Their unbelief cannot make "the faith of God" without effect. One important question here is whether this is subjective (God's faith, or perhaps His faithfulness) or objective (the faith that God established, i.e., the Christian faith). But no matter which we take it, can a Europe filled with baptized infidels undo the glorious truth proclaimed in baptism? Not a bit of it, and God forbid. Every last covenant member could be a skunk, and God remains true (v. 4). Our task is not to conform the sacrament to the behavior of people, but rather to conform the people to the nature of the sacrament. And then Paul quotes Psalm 51:4, to powerful effect (v. 4).

CHAPTER 4



BLESSED IS THE MAN

The word *imputation* may seem like one of those technical theological words, the kind that make your head hurt, but it is really quite straightforward—and *full* of blessing.

What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the

ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. (Rom. 4:1–8)

What did Abraham, our father, discover (v. 1)? He would have had something to boast about if he had been justified by works (v. 2). The problem is that this is not possible for any flesh, so Abraham wouldn't have been able to boast before God (v. 2). So what does the Bible say about his justification? It says that Abraham believed God, and that this was *reckoned* to him, *counted* to him, *imputed* to him, as righteousness (v. 3). The basic division between works and grace is then outlined—work gets a paycheck, and this is the antithesis of grace (v. 4). But for the one who does not work, but instead believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned, counted, imputed to him for righteousness (v. 5). David describes the blessed condition of a man who has received this grace, and it is a twofold grace. First, God imputes righteousness apart from works (v. 6). Paul then quotes the place where David says this (Ps. 32:1–2), and he does so to double effect. Blessed is the man whose sins are forgiven (v. 7) and whose sins are covered (v. 7). He continues—blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin (v. 8). We have two kinds of imputation here. The positive imputation of righteousness, and the nonimputation of sin.

EXCURSUS: 21 PRINCIPLES A CHRISTIAN CITIZEN MUST KNOW



Because the teaching of the Apostle Paul on civil authority is widely misunderstood and misrepresented, we are going to take our time going through this section. And because the instructions here are to Christian citizens and subjects, we are going to begin with a scriptural introduction to this entire subject. And because of who is addressed here, it is important to remember something that Abraham Kuyper once said: “In any successful attack on freedom the state can only be an accomplice. The *chief* culprit is the citizen who forgets his duty, wastes away his strength in the sleep of sin and sensual pleasure, and so

loses the power of his own initiative.”⁸ We are therefore going to consider 21 principles on civil government that the Christian must understand.

21 PRINCIPLES

Civil government and rule is a blessing from God, not a necessary evil. “The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And *he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth*, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain” (2 Sam. 23:3–4, emphasis added). We are not anarchists.

God establishes a righteous throne with majesty. “It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for *the throne is established by righteousness*” (Prov. 16:12, emphasis added). “And the LORD magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, *and bestowed upon him such royal majesty* as had not been on any king before him in Israel” (1 Chron. 25:29; Dan. 4:36).

The law of God is the soul of a good ruler. “Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, *such as fear God*, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens” (Exod. 18:21, emphasis added).

God requires true humility of His rulers. “That *his heart be not lifted up above his brethren*, and that he turn not aside

8. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 473.