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TROUBLE, TROUBLE, TROUBLE— BUT HELP IS ON THE WAY

Background from the Author

You have begun the study of the most intellectually demanding book in the New Testament. Fortunately, your own experience in reading important letters can be very helpful. Think back on love letters you have received or still receive. Or perhaps you received letters from a family member serving in the military on an overseas assignment. Think about how you poured over those letters. How you noticed every little turn of phrase. How you sought to decipher each word. How you read between the lines. How you noticed changes from one letter to the next. And how you read the letter repeatedly to find confirmation or discontinuation of your understanding of the author's intent. That kind of keen attention to the most minute detail and nuance can be very useful in reading Romans.

To spot these important shadings of meaning one must have time to ponder every word and phrase. That is especially true here in the opening of the letter which reveals Paul's intentions. A comparison of this letter opening with that of 1 Thessalonians, Paul's first letter, will reveal vast differences and give you a better sense of the agenda of Romans. A word of caution is in order: Check your surmises, suspicions, understandings, and perceptions against the point of view reflected elsewhere in the letter.

As you read the letter, pay special attention to the salutation that stretches from verse 1 through 7. There is so much here that will pay rich dividends for hard thought. For example, note the first phrase, "Paul a slave of Christ Jesus." Note how rarely Paul uses the term "slave" in the

salutation. Elsewhere only in Philippians does he use the word in the opening and then in a quite different way. How would that metaphor be understood in the first century? What was the nature of slavery? What were the conditions of slaves? How many Christians have direct experience with slavery? You can interrogate the text and try to find the answers. A good Bible dictionary is a valuable tool for this kind of study also. The preferred choice is the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (five volumes), but there are good one-volume tools as well. The *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* is excellent, and the *Dictionary of the Bible* by Eerdmans is outstanding.

Pay special attention to Paul's identification of himself as an apostle. Note all of the language around that reference, "called to be an apostle." Called by whom? Called for what? What is the evidence? We are so accustomed to thinking of Paul as an apostle that it may be very difficult for us to imagine a time when many disputed his legitimacy. Why would they be skeptical of his apostolic status?

In the thanksgiving (1:8–17) Paul telegraphs to the reader the agenda of the letter. He reveals his obligation to "Greeks and barbarians," that is to non-Jews. Since most Christians have little or no sense of their Jewish connection and since from the second century on Jews were unwelcome in the church, we may have little sense of how radical Paul's mission was. Also, most are usually unaware that in Paul's time the majority of those in the Jesus movement were Jews. The center of gravity of this movement was in Jerusalem in the Jewish-Christian church, not in the Gentile mission. Jerusalem was the symbolic center of the world. There Jesus had died and was raised. There Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and other pillar apostles presided over the Jerusalem circle. It was uncertain if the Gentile mission would succeed at all. Moreover, there was wide disagreement about what that Gentile church should be like, or under what conditions Gentiles should be admitted.

As mentioned in chapter 1 of the Resource Book, no verses in Romans have had a greater influence on Protestant Christianity than 1:16–17 which I have placed at the end of the thanksgiving. It is important to be clear about these verses because, as the theme of Romans, the way they are read will influence how one reads the rest of the letter. While Paul is concerned in the letters with individuals, it is a gross misreading to limit them to that concern. Paul sketches a big picture that reaches beyond any one person to encompass the cosmos itself. So, when you read 1:16–17 try to place it in a global setting.

Understanding Paul's apocalypticism or thoughts about the end of the world will pose a challenge. Romans 13:11–12 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 place the end time on the near

horizon. Paul believed absolutely that believers already had a foretaste of the life to come, *but* the full realization of that new life would come only in the future. The tension between the now and the not yet was integral to the Christian life. That model is still very useful. Also, Paul believed passionately that God in Christ had begun a campaign to set things straight in a crooked world, and that would continue until the end of time. If the future is God's future, one can live in hope and confidence. The important truth of Paul's end-time thinking is not in a timetable, but in the great theological truth embedded in that thinking.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Explain why it is important to remember that Romans is a real letter written to specific people and situations.
2. Identify 2–4 issues that Paul addresses in Romans.
3. Restate Romans 1:16–17 in their own words.
4. Discuss what Paul's belief about the end times would have meant for him and for the early Christians.

Resources You May Need

Copies of Worksheets 3A and 3B

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

- Have slide #26, the title slide, projected as participants enter.
 - Advance to slide #27 with the learning objectives as you begin the session.
1. **Quick Conversations.** Two or more quick conversations, each with different partners, are a good way to set the stage for the study of Scripture and to get to know one another better at the same time. If you are asking two questions, a quick way to form pairs is to count off by twos and invite the “ones” to take the persons on their right as their partners. (It's best to

separate spouses before counting off, as spouses have already heard each other's stories.) For the second question, the "ones" pair off with the persons on their left. To use three or four questions, form a circle, count off by twos, and ask the "ones" to take the hand of the persons on their right and to take a big step toward the center of the circle, still facing their partners. You will now have two concentric circles, with partners facing one another. For each new question, the outer circle (twos) stand still while the inner circle (ones) move one person to their right to gain new partners. Choose from the following questions, allowing 2–3 minutes for each conversation. ■ Project slide #28 with the following questions: (8–15 minutes)

- Tell about an eagerly awaited or important letter you have received.
- Tell about an important or meaningful letter you have written.
- What letters have you saved? Who from? Why have you saved them?
- What collections of letters are you aware of—from family, acquaintances, literature?

or

Getting Paul's Letter. Invite the group members to imagine, just for fun, that they are a congregation in a church Paul founded and that a letter from Paul has just arrived. What might their reactions be? (For example, "I can't wait to hear what Paul has to say!" "I wonder if he's heard about the way we're fighting with each other?") Conclude by saying that imagining ourselves as recipients of a letter from Paul helps us remember that Romans is a real letter written to real people. (5 minutes)

2. **Romans as a Letter.** Ask "How is a letter different from an essay or a book of theology?" Using information from the section "A Real Letter" in the Resource Book, emphasize that all of the biblical "books" Paul wrote were actually letters written to specific churches in response to situations or problems that had come to his attention. (5 minutes)

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. **Issues in the Roman Church.** Drawing from information in the Resource Book, briefly summarize the historical background of Paul's letter to the Romans. ■ Project slides #29–30 with an outline of the following information or review the information below with the group:

Writing from Corinth toward the end of his career, Paul intended to take his gospel message to Spain, stopping at Rome to visit the Christians there. Although he had never been to Rome, he had heard about quarrels within the Roman congregations.

In 49 CE the Roman Emperor Claudius had expelled Christian Jews from Rome, but he allowed Gentile Christians to remain. After the death of Claudius in 54 CE, Nero allowed Jewish Christians to return. But their return caused friction between the Jewish arrivals and the Gentile believers, to the extent that Paul feared this dissension would jeopardize the ability of the Roman church to share in the mission to Spain.

Observing that Paul's letter to the Romans addressed specific issues, ■ project slide #31 or write the following questions on a chalkboard, whiteboard, or newsprint:

What was Paul's authority to counsel the Romans?

Can Gentiles be Christians without converting to Judaism?

Ask participants to either work as one group or in smaller groups of 4–6 and to look in Romans 1:1–7 for answers to these questions. After a few minutes, invite them to call out answers to each question, listing them on the board. Emphasize that by calling himself an *apostle*, Paul presents himself as one to whom Christ has given authority to speak in his name, and that by announcing salvation for *everyone*, Paul pointedly includes both Jews and Gentiles. Note that Paul will continue to deal with these issues throughout his letter to the Romans. (10 minutes)

or

Looking for Clues. As in the option above, briefly explain the historical background of Paul's letter to the Romans and list the two critical questions (see above) on a chalkboard, whiteboard, or newsprint. Note that the introductory parts of Paul's letter provide clues about the message of the letter as a whole. Quickly divide into six groups and ■ project slide #32 with the following references. Assign each group one of these passages.

1:1–4 1:5–6 1:7–10 1:11–13 1:14–15 1:16–17

The groups are to read their assigned passages looking for clues to the way Paul will answer these questions in the rest of the letter. As in the option above, emphasize the importance of Paul's authority as an *apostle*, and his insistence that the gospel is for *everyone*. (10 minutes)

- 2. Defining Righteousness.** Ask, "What comes to your mind when you think of *righteousness*!" List their answers on the board. Then quote or summarize Dr. Roetzel's discussion of the meaning of *righteousness* in the section "Key Words" in the Resource Book.

After a brief discussion of *righteousness as God's action*, invite the group to look at the list they made and identify items that reflect Paul's meaning (for example, "right relationship with God"). Place an asterisk by these phrases. Then invite the group to add other words and phrases that clarify Paul's meaning. (5–10 minutes)

or

Righteousness: A Report. Ahead of time, ask a volunteer to prepare a brief report on the meaning of the word "righteousness" as Paul uses it, based on information from the Resource Book and from a Bible dictionary.

- 3. A Reflection on Romans 1:16–17.** Invite participants to complete Worksheet 3A working individually. After 8–10 minutes, bring the group together. Tell participants that they will have an opportunity to share what they have written with the whole group as part of the Closing if they wish to do so. Conclude by noting that Romans 1:16–17 is a capsule summary of the central message of Paul's letter to the Romans. (15 minutes)

or

Restating Romans 1:16–17. ■ Project slide #33 or write the six phrases from Romans 1:16–17 on a chalkboard, whiteboard, or newsprint as they are listed on Worksheet 3A. Quickly divide into six groups, assign one phrase to each group, and invite each group to work together to restate their assigned phrase in their own words. After about five minutes, call the whole group to attention and, taking the groups in order, invite a spokesperson from each group to read its paraphrase. Conclude by noting that for Paul, this statement had *global* as well as personal significance. In Christ, God was already in the process of reclaiming the whole world. (10 minutes)

- 4. End Times.** Ask participants what their ideas are about "end times" or the "coming of God's reign." List their answers as they are given. Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:1 and invite participants' reactions. Then read or summarize the following statements from the second paragraph under "The Thanksgiving" in the Resource Book:

It appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that Paul expected the end within his lifetime. It is important not to get bogged down in the question of whether the apostle could have been wrong about the timing of the end. ... It is more important to understand

what Paul's thinking about the end would have meant to him and his converts, and the continuing value it has for us today.

- Project slide #34 and lead a discussion with the group based on some of the following questions:

How would the belief that he was living in the end times affect Paul's outlook and message?

What positive attitudes and actions can result from believing that the end is near? What are the dangers?

What are we to know and do now?

Conclude by quoting or summarizing Dr. Roetzel's statement that Romans 1:16–17 contains Paul's basic conviction that "God's final rule of righteousness was breaking in, and God was already in the process of reclaiming a world slipping out of control." (10 minutes)

CLOSING

1. **A Pauline Letter.** Suggest that participants, working individually, complete Worksheet 3B, "Introduction to a Pauline Letter." After 6–8 minutes, invite those who wish to do so to read the Salutations and Thanksgivings they have written. Ask, "How did it feel to write 'thanksgivings and affirmations' to a congregation that was different from yours?" You might conclude by quoting Dr. Roetzel's statement under "Conclusion" that Paul was calling on the Roman congregations "to pour less energy into erecting barriers ... and to develop creative efforts that promoted mutual acceptance." (10 minutes)

or

Thanksgivings and Affirmations. Read aloud Romans 1:8–12. Note that in writing to the Romans, Paul was addressing Christians who had some disagreements with one another—and perhaps with Paul himself; yet he began by thanking God for them and affirming their faith. Invite participants to picture in their minds fellow Christians with whom they disagree and to jot down statements of thanksgiving or affirmation for those persons beginning with the word "Because ...". After a few minutes, invite those who wish to do so to read their "Because" thanksgivings and affirmations. After each statement, the group may respond "May we be mutually encouraged by one another's faith." ■ Project slide #35 of the response. (8 minutes)

- 2. Personal Reflections on Romans 1:16–17.** If the group completed Worksheet 3A, “A Reflection on Romans 1:16–17” in Exploring the Scripture #3, read the passage slowly, pausing after each phrase to invite responses from the worksheets. Conclude by reading Romans 1:16–17 slowly together. (5 minutes)

and/or

A Hymn. Sing your theme hymn or “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian,” “I Love to Tell the Story,” “Shall We Gather at the River?” or “Love Divine.” If singing “Shall We Gather at the River?” note that the river in the hymn refers to the “river of the water of life” in the final chapter of Revelation, which describes the consummation of human history. (3 minutes)

and/or

Prayer. Close with your own prayer giving thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and asking for the unity of the church and the mutual upbuilding of one another's faith. (2 minutes)

Looking Ahead

In the next session, Setting the Stage #2 suggests inviting a volunteer to make a brief report on the Old Testament concept of the “Day of the Lord,” based on the Resource Book and a good Bible dictionary.

This session also suggests closing with a prayer of confession from your congregation's hymnal, prayer book, or book of worship. Your pastor can help you locate an appropriate prayer. You will need copies of this prayer for each one or two participants.

A REFLECTION ON ROMANS 1:16–17

Romans 1:16–17 summarizes the central message of Paul’s letter to the Romans:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Read the phrases below slowly and carefully. Then choose one that seems important to you and write something about what this phrase means to you. You might simply write words or phrases that come to your mind. (In #1 below for example, words might be “proud,” “confident” or “willing to take risks.”) Or you might write a sentence or two to express the meaning or give an example of a way you see this phrase operating in your life. You will have an opportunity to read what you have written to the whole group if you wish to do so.

- 1) I am **not ashamed of the gospel;**
- 2) it is the power of God for **salvation**
- 3) **to everyone who has faith,** to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
- 4) For in it the **righteousness of God is revealed**
- 5) **through faith for faith;**
- 6) as it is written, **“the one who is righteous will live by faith.”**

INTRODUCTION TO A PAULINE LETTER

Imagine that you are preparing to write a letter in the “Pauline” style to a church having a theology or style of worship that is different from yours. Using a traditional format for letters in Paul’s day, write the Salutation and Thanksgiving (the beginning parts of the letter). These may be very brief. You may use some of Paul’s words if you wish.

Salutation

From _____
(your name and a description of yourself such as Paul’s “a slave to Christ.”)

To _____
(a church whose theology or style is different from yours)

Greeting _____
(such as Paul’s greeting in verse 7)

Thanksgiving _____
(Affirmations of persons in this congregation and their faith)