

INTRODUCTION

I. ROMANS: ITS INFLUENCE AND IMPORTANCE

God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path (Ps 119:105), and no part of it shines more brilliantly than the book of Romans. The truth of God's Word sets us free (John 8:32), and Romans teaches us the most liberating of all truths. God's Word is sharp and piercing like a sword (Heb 4:12), and no blade penetrates more deeply into our hearts than Romans. Overall the book of Romans may be the most read and most influential book of the Bible, but sometimes it is the most neglected and most misunderstood book.

In 1 Cor 15:3-4 Paul sums up the gospel as these three truths: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised up again on the third day. The reality of the historical facts of the Savior's death and resurrection is stressed over and over in the book of Acts. Romans, however, is an exposition of the *meaning* of these facts. In the language of 1 Cor 15:3, Romans focuses not on "Christ died," but on the next three words: "*for our sins.*" Acts explains what salvation consists of and how we may receive it. Romans does the same, but carries the explanation to heights and depths that thrill and satisfy the soul, providing it with an experience that is at the same time intellectual, spiritual, and esthetic.¹

The unparalleled ability of Romans to convict sinners and to motivate Christians is well attested. The comment of Sanday and Headlam (v) has often been noted: "If it is a historical fact that the spiritual revivals of Christendom have been usually associated with closer study of the Bible, this would be true in an eminent degree of the Epistle to the Romans." Leon Morris (1) concurs: "It is commonly agreed that the Epistle to the Romans is one of the greatest Christian writings. Its power has been demonstrated again and again at critical points in the history of the Christian church" (●I:22-24).

Modern scholars and expositors seem unable to praise the letter to the Romans highly enough. "This is in every sense the greatest of the Epistles of Paul, if not the greatest book in the New Testament," declares Thiessen (*Introduction*, 219). Newell (375) says Romans is "probably the greatest book in the Bible." "If the apostle Paul had written nothing else, he would still be recognized as one of the outstanding Christian thinkers of all time on the basis of this letter alone," say Newman and Nida (1) (●I:24-25).

Scholars praise Romans as the clearest statement of the *gospel* of salvation. Luther called it “the purest gospel” (“Preface,” 365). Nygren agrees (3): “What the gospel is, what the content of the Christian faith is, one learns to know in the Epistle to the Romans as in no other place in the New Testament” (☉I:25). Scholars also praise Romans for its unparalleled presentation of the essence of Christian *doctrine*. In his “Preface” to Romans (380) Luther says that in Romans we “find most abundantly the things that a Christian ought to know, namely, what is law, gospel, sin, punishment, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross; and also how we are to conduct ourselves toward everyone.” Thus, as Schaff says (“Preface,” v), it seems that Paul “wanted in this one epistle to sum up briefly the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine” (☉I:26).

Concerning its doctrinal content, MacArthur lists 49 significant questions about God and man that are answered by Romans, e.g., How can a person who has never heard the gospel be held spiritually responsible? How can a sinner be forgiven and justified by God? How are God’s grace and God’s law related? Why is there suffering? MacArthur (I:xi-xii) points out that these key words are used repeatedly in the epistle: God (154 times), law (77), Christ (66), sin (45), Lord (44), and faith (40).

Which of these assessments is correct? Is Romans the crowning presentation of the Christian *gospel*? Or is it the grandest statement of Christian *doctrine*? Actually, it is both. Romans is *the* theology of the New Testament; it is also *the* definitive statement of the gospel. In this epistle doctrine and gospel merge, and the result is a spiritual feast for Christians.

Boice (I:10) advises that “it is time to rediscover Romans.” Actually, it is *always* time to “rediscover” Romans, and down through the history of Christianity individuals have been doing just this. The results have been earth-shaking. It can and does happen over and over, in the lives of individuals, in congregations, in the Church at large. F.F. Bruce (60) has well said, “There is no telling what may happen when people begin to study the Epistle to the Romans.”

II. THE AUTHOR OF ROMANS

The epistle to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul (1:1).² In the past a few critics challenged this, but without any real basis in fact (SH, lxxxvi-lxxxvii). Today, as Cranfield says, “no responsible criticism disputes its Pauline origin” (I:2) (☉I:27).

A. Paul’s Jewish Background

It is not necessary to go into the details of Paul’s life, except for a few facts that are important in view of the content of the epistle, which relates especially to the distinction between law and grace. One relevant fact is Paul’s Jewish

background, which he proudly avowed: “I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin,” a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (11:1; Phil 3:5; 2 Cor 11:22). Though born in Tarsus, he was reared in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), the capital of Judaism.

Paul’s education included strict and thorough religious training in the contents of the Old Testament – especially the Law (Torah) – at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was one of the most famous and most revered of all rabbis. His knowledge of the Law was so great that he was practically identified with it. “Under Gamaliel,” says Paul, “I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3).

Paul’s zeal for God and commitment to his Law was total (Acts 22:3; Gal 1:14). He was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Phil 3:5), which he properly identified as “the strictest sect of our religion” (Acts 26:5). The glory of the Pharisees was the Law. Thus Paul not only knew the Law but also devoted himself to scrupulous obedience to its commandments (Acts 26:4-5; Phil 3:6).

This probably means that he was a legalist in the proper sense of that word, i.e., one who sought acceptance by God on the basis of his obedience to the Law. This is implied in the way he contrasted his pre-Christian life (Phil 3:6) and his Christian life (Phil 3:9). This is also the way Pharisees are generally pictured in the Gospels.

Paul’s zeal for the Law was expressed perhaps most vehemently in his fanatical persecution of the earliest Christians, all converted Jews whom he no doubt regarded as traitors to God and his Law (Phil 3:6).

B. Paul’s Conversion to Christianity

The second relevant fact about the Apostle Paul is his conversion. The details need not be recounted here. What is important is that the one who converted him to Christianity was no human preacher, but was Jesus himself (Gal 1:15-16). Also, the gospel he preached was not taught to him by a human teacher; he received it by direct revelation from Jesus (Gal 1:11-12). The result was that Paul’s conversion, his change, his turnaround, was complete. Whereas before he was totally committed to the Mosaic Law as a way of life and salvation, once converted he was just as totally committed to the gospel of grace.

As a Christian Paul set himself in complete opposition to everything he had stood for as a Pharisee. He now understood the way of law to be futile (10:3). He saw that his former legalistic approach to salvation was, as Murray says, “the antithesis of grace and of justification by faith” (I:xiii). Thus when Paul presents the classic contrast between law and grace in Romans, he speaks as one who knew both sides of the issue from personal experience and from the best teachers available (● I:29).

C. Paul's Commission as the Apostle to the Gentiles

The last detail about Paul's life that is relevant here is his call and commission to be the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 26:17). His appointment as an *apostle* (1:1) invested him with the full authority of Jesus Christ and with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that his teachings are truly the Word of God (1 Cor 2:6-13; 1 Thess 2:13). When we read the book of Romans, we must understand it to be nothing less than this.

Also, Paul's appointment as the apostle *to the Gentiles* (1:5) completely governed his thoughts and deeds from that point on. As a Jew and a Pharisee, he had no doubt shared the typical Hebrew aversion to anything Gentile; and he had no doubt gloried in the Jews' exclusive position as God's chosen people. Thus when God revealed to him the mystery of the Gentiles – that it had been his plan all along to include Gentiles in the people of the Messiah (Eph 3:1-10), Paul was overwhelmed with awe and joy (●I:30).

Throughout the Roman epistle, Paul writes with the full consciousness of his mission to the Gentiles and of the Gentiles in his audience. One point that he clarifies in the letter is the relation of the Gentiles to the Jews with respect to salvation.

III. TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING

(See ●I:30-31.) While in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, "Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also'" (Acts 19:21). He shortly departed for Achaia (Greece) and arrived in Corinth, where he stayed for three months (Acts 20:1-3) (●I:31).

It was in the midst of this final journey, during the three months Paul spent at Corinth, that he most likely wrote the letter to the Romans. He was apparently staying at the house of Gaius (16:23), one of his converts at Corinth (1 Cor 1:14). The letter was carried to Rome by Phoebe, a Christian from the church in nearby Cenchræa (16:1).

The exact date of the writing of Romans is calculated in relation to the overall chronology of Paul's life and work. There is no unanimity on this chronology, though the differences of opinion are minor. Everyone agrees that the Apostle's stay in Corinth must have been in late winter and/or early spring, since he planned to set out from there and arrive in Jerusalem by Pentecost. Most agree also that this would have been in the middle or late 50s. Thus Romans was probably written early in A.D. 56, 57, or 58.

IV. RECIPIENTS OF ROMANS: THE CHURCH IN ROME

Rome was the largest and most important city in the Roman Empire in Paul's day. Its population was probably over one million (Unger, *Dictionary*,

936). Of this number, it is estimated that forty to fifty thousand were Jews, with as many as fifteen identifiable synagogues (Dunn, I:xlvi; Edwards, 9).

How the church in Rome originated is not known. There is no real evidence that Peter founded it, contrary to a common tradition. Some say that Rom 15:20 shows this could not have been the case. Here Paul says that he does not intend to “be building on someone else’s foundation.” The fact that he did plan to visit Rome and work there implies that no apostle had been there yet (MacArthur, I:xxviii; Moo, 4).

One very common speculation is that the Roman church was probably started by Jews and proselytes from Rome who were in the audience that heard Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10) and who were among the converts baptized that day. Upon returning to Rome, they would have established the church there. If so, and this seems very likely, then the first Christians in Rome were converts from Judaism.

Another likely speculation is that Christians from other churches, perhaps some of Paul’s own converts from his earlier work, were among those who started the Roman church and helped it to grow. Perhaps some of Paul’s acquaintances named in Romans 16 were among this group. Such a scenario is highly probable, given the importance of Rome and the constant travel to and from that city.

Thus the church in Rome would have begun not as the result of some formal missionary effort, but by residents converted while traveling (e.g., Acts 2:10) and by Christians moving there from other places. Their own evangelistic efforts would certainly have focused on the synagogues of Rome, following the pattern of evangelism reflected in the book of Acts. This would have resulted in converts not only from Judaism but also from among Gentile “God-fearers” who were commonly attached to the synagogues (Dunn, I:xlvii-xlviii).

The epistle to the Romans is addressed “to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7) (☉I:33-34). These saints in Rome were almost certainly a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians, though there is no way to tell which group had the larger number. There appears to have been tension if not conflict among the two groups (☉I:34).

What is obvious is that in the epistle Paul addresses both groups, with some passages being specifically directed toward the Jewish Christians and some toward the Gentile Christians (see Moo, 9-10; Murray, I:xxviii-xix). Some say the letter as a whole is directed mainly to the Jewish saints; others say it was mainly intended for the Gentiles.

Hendriksen is surely right, though, when he says that regarding the main point of Romans this whole question is really irrelevant, since it applies equally to both groups (1:23). *All* are sinners (3:9,23), *no one* will be saved by law (3:19-20), and *all* are equal recipients of the grace that is in Christ Jesus (3:24; 4:11-12). Hendriksen stresses Rom 10:12-13, “For there is no difference between Jew

and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

V. THE OCCASION OF THE WRITING

What were the circumstances that prompted Paul to write his epistle to the Romans? We are fortunate that Paul reveals his mind to us in certain statements of his desires and plans in chapters 1 and 15. These statements show us what occasioned the writing of Romans.

One main consideration was Paul’s immediate travel plans. After preaching 20 years in the eastern and northeastern sections of the Mediterranean area, he was now planning a trip to Spain (15:15-24). But first he had to go to Jerusalem (15:25-31). His purpose for doing this was to deliver the funds he had been collecting from the Gentile churches “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (15:26). He wanted to do this personally, to make sure that the funds were properly received (15:28). To this end he asked the Roman Christians to offer two specific prayers for him (15:30-31).

First, he knew that he still had many enemies in Jerusalem among the Jews especially, so he requested that the Roman Christians “pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea” (15:31) (☉I:36).

Second, Paul was not really sure how the offering from the Gentile churches would be received by the Jewish saints in Jerusalem (☉I:36). He was anxious that it might be received in the proper spirit, so he asked the Romans to pray “that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there” (15:31).

Thus Paul was ultimately bound for Spain, after an initial trip to Jerusalem. But there was a third item in his itinerary: an intermediate stop in Rome itself (Acts 19:21; 23:11), a place he had never been. So he announced to the Christians in Rome that on his way to Spain he would stop and visit them (15:23,24,28). This was something he had longed to do for many years and had even made plans to do (1:11,13; 15:23), but had “often been hindered from coming to you” (15:22; cf. 1:13) (☉I:36).

Paul had several reasons for wanting to visit Rome, but mainly he just wanted to preach the gospel there. “I am obligated,” he says, “both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome” (1:14-15). By this means or by some accompanying means he would be able to “impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong” (1:11). This would also enable him to “have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles” (1:13) (☉I:37).

VI. THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS

The question of Paul’s *purpose* for writing the epistle to the Romans is very controversial; there is much disagreement about it (see *RomDeb*). Everyone

agrees on the facts described above relating to the *occasion* for the writing. The problem is that these facts have to be assessed in view of the contents of the main body of the letter, 1:18–15:13. The question is not just why he wrote a letter to the Roman church, but why he wrote this *specific* letter with this particular content. Why does he write “such a lengthy and involved discussion to a largely unknown congregation”? (Dunn, I:lv).

There are two basic approaches to this question. The older and more traditional approach is that the historical circumstances as described in the previous section were not particularly relevant with regard to Paul’s decision to write the letter. Neither Paul’s own plans nor the state of the Roman church presented him with a pressing need or occasion that required him to write. Thus, unlike his other letters, Romans is more or less nonoccasional. It is regarded rather as a kind of timeless theological essay on the essence of Christianity.

The more recent approaches to the purpose of Romans take the opposite view, that it is “a situational letter rather than a doctrinal treatise” (Jewett, “Argument,” 265). Paul was not simply writing an essay detached from his circumstances, but was specifically addressing a particular situation that needed his attention at that time. Thus Romans is just as much an occasional letter as 1 Corinthians or Galatians.

Those who take the latter approach usually go in one of two directions. Some emphasize that Paul wrote the letter to fulfill certain needs of his own, relating to his trip either to Jerusalem or to Spain. Others say that Paul wrote mainly to meet the needs of the Roman church at that particular time.

It is possible, of course, that Paul had more than one purpose for writing Romans.

A. Romans Is a Doctrinal Essay

Now we shall go into a bit more detail concerning the possibilities outlined above. The first view is that Paul was not addressing a specific situation but was writing a timeless doctrinal essay. In its most extreme form this view says that Romans is a complete systematic theology, a compendium of Christian doctrine (● I:38-39).

Most who take this nonoccasional view, however, say that it is an exaggeration to call Romans a full-blown systematic theology. It is a doctrinal essay, to be sure, but one that is more focused and limited in its scope.

Just what is the focus of this doctrinal essay? The most common view is that it has to do with the doctrines of salvation, i.e., that Romans is a summary or synopsis of Paul’s *gospel* (● I:39). Vincent summarizes this whole approach quite well when he says that Romans “is distinguished among the epistles by its systematic character. Its object is to present a comprehensive statement of the doctrine of salvation through Christ, not a complete system of christian doctrine” (*Word Studies*, III:x).

The idea that Romans is a kind of doctrinal essay focusing on the general doctrine of salvation is correct, in my opinion. However, I do not think it is wise to separate it too sharply from the occasion or circumstances discussed in the last section. It *is* an essay on salvation, but its purpose was definitely related to the circumstances at that time, as we shall see below.

B. Romans Was Occasioned by Paul's Immediate Needs

The second major approach to the purpose of Romans is that it was occasioned by the various circumstances relating to Paul's immediate plans in relation to his mission. In other words, it was designed to meet needs that Paul felt in his own life at the time.

The main idea here is that Paul determines to set forth in writing a "sermon" or a lengthy presentation of his gospel. He does this because he needs to introduce himself to people who are not familiar with him or with what he preaches. Or, he does this because his enemies are spreading false rumors about what he preaches, and are misrepresenting his gospel especially as to what he says about Jew-Gentile relations. Thus Romans is not just a presentation but also a defense of Paul's gospel (☉I:41-42).

Why was it crucial for Paul at this particular time to write such a presentation and defense of his gospel? The answer is that it was necessary in order to facilitate his immediate plans. For one thing, he was on his way to Jerusalem with the offering for the poor saints, and was apprehensive about how this would turn out. Thus some contend that in this letter Paul was rehearsing what he was going to say in Jerusalem in defense of himself and in an effort to seal Jew-Gentile unity (☉I:41).

Though this is a fairly common view today, some object to it or at least doubt that it could be the only purpose for Romans (Moo, 18). Thus other aspects of Paul's immediate plans must have elicited the letter. One of the most obvious is Paul's plan to visit Rome itself. Though he knew some of the Roman Christians, he had never been in Rome and would not know most of the people there. It must have seemed expedient, then, for him to write a kind of "letter of introduction" for himself, especially in view of the false rumors that were probably afoot (☉I:41-42).

Those who hold this view usually take it a step further, and say that Paul laid out and defended his gospel to the Romans as a means of enlisting their support for his Spanish mission. In a real sense Rome was just a means to an end, both in Paul's itinerary and in his missionary strategy. He needed them as a kind of "base of operations" for what he hoped to accomplish in Spain (Stott, 33). Thus "if Rome was to be his base, the Romans would need to be assured of his message and theological position" (Morris, 17).

C. Romans Was Occasioned by Needs at Rome Itself

As we have just seen, those who believe the writing of Romans was motivated by the immediate circumstances sometimes locate those circumstances in Paul's own personal needs. Others who take the occasional approach, however, believe that the situation in Rome itself is what Paul is specifically addressing in this epistle (☉I:42).

Whatever the nature of those problems or needs, Paul wrote to resolve them. Since all of Paul's other letters were "addressed to the specific situations of the churches or persons involved," says Donfried, we must begin with the assumption that Romans "was written by Paul to deal with a concrete situation in Rome" ("Presuppositions," 103).

1. The Need for Jew-Gentile Unity

What sorts of needs existed at Rome that would call forth from Paul's pen the most magnificent gospel tract ever written? Several possibilities are suggested, but the one most commonly held begins with the assumption that there was considerable tension in the Roman church between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Thus the purpose of Paul's letter was to resolve this tension.

This view usually grows out of speculations concerning the development of the Roman church following Claudius's decree expelling the Jews from Rome. With Jewish Christians being forced to leave Rome, the Gentile Christians became the dominant force; and this situation prevailed even after the former returned to Rome. This led to conflict between the two factions. This scenario is supported by the various references to Jews and Gentiles (Greeks) in Romans, by the discussion of the weak (Jews?) and the strong (Gentiles?) in 14:1-15:13, and by several references to unity and division within the church (12:16; 15:5; 16:17-18) (☉I:43-44).

2. The Need for an Apostolic Foundation

Another possible need being addressed by Paul is related to the circumstances of the origin of the church in Rome. It is inferred from 15:20 that no apostle was involved in its founding, nor as yet had even visited Rome. Thus Paul was concerned that the church did not have a solid apostolic foundation (see Eph 2:20), and he writes this epistle in order to provide that foundation. This is the view of Günter Klein ("Purpose," 39, 42), but Morris (11-12) gives reasons for doubting it.

3. The Need for Paul's Gospel

Another possibility (to which I subscribe) is that Paul did indeed recognize the need of the Roman church to hear his apostolic preaching and teaching, but not necessarily in a foundational sense. This view begins with Paul's sense

of duty, based upon his special calling, to preach the gospel to everyone in the Gentile world (1:14), including those in Rome: “That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome” (1:15).

But these people are already Christians. Why would Paul want to “preach the gospel” to *believers*? Here is a point that is often missed: the gospel is more than just the initial evangelistic witness given to unbelievers with a view to their conversion. It also includes the deeper meaning and implications of the basic facts of salvation, which are things about which even mature believers can never hear enough. That Paul wanted to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome means that he wanted to go deeper into the meaning of Christ’s saving work “for our sins,” unfolding for them the full power of the gospel in the Christian life and at the same time clearing up common misunderstandings that may arise through incomplete knowledge.

Paul’s desire, of course, was to do this in person, and he had often planned to travel to Rome for this very reason. Up to this point, however, God’s providence had prevented it (1:13; 15:22). Now he is once again planning to go to Rome, after his trip to Jerusalem with the offering. But based on his past experience and the uncertainty about what would happen to him in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24), at this point he could not be certain that he would ever reach Rome in person (SH, xlii).

This led Paul to the conclusion that if he was ever going to preach the gospel in Rome, perhaps the only way he would be able to do so was *in writing*. Thus he takes the time, while staying in Corinth just before traveling to Jerusalem, to prepare a well-thought-out essay on the gospel as every Christian needs to hear it; and he sends it on to Rome in advance of his intended trip there.

According to this view, then, Romans is not just a basic presentation of the gospel, written in order to provide the Roman Christians with a missing apostolic foundation. And as Nygren (7) rightly notes, “it is a misunderstanding of Romans to see in it a typical example of Paul’s missionary preaching.” This is contrary to those who think Paul was just introducing himself to the Roman church, hoping to win their support for his mission to Spain by rehearsing the gospel as he usually preached it. Stuhlmacher rightly notes that how Paul “preached and taught as a missionary cannot be simply inferred from the outline of Romans” (“Purpose,” 242).

According to this view, then, the primary purpose for Romans is not related to some need within Paul himself (e.g., his concern for defending himself; his missionary plans); nor is it related to some negative situation in the Roman church (e.g., Jew-Gentile disunity). It is motivated rather by Paul’s loving concern for his fellow-Christians at Rome, and his desire to bless their hearts and lives with this written version of the deeper aspects of the gospel of grace (☉I:46).

D. Conclusion

We have surveyed the main reasons why Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans. It should be obvious that some of these reasons may overlap or be combined; so we need not focus narrowly upon just one of them (●I:46).

In my opinion, though, the dominant reason is the last one discussed above: Paul's desire to preach the gospel to the Romans, and his decision to do so in the form of an epistle. This is the factor that Paul stresses in the introductory section of the letter, where we would expect him to say what is closest to his heart. It seems inappropriate to give priority to ch. 15 on this matter, and to pass over what Paul himself chooses to mention first of all. Just because he tells the Romans about his plans in ch. 15 is no reason to assume that his purpose for writing to Rome is specifically or directly related to these plans.

We may conclude, then, that Romans is indeed an *occasional* letter, that it was occasioned by the need of the Roman Christians to hear Paul's gospel and by the circumstances that made it expedient for him to send it to them in written form at this particular time. Thus Romans is by design a clear presentation of the deeper implications of the gospel, written not for Paul's sake but for the sake of the church at Rome. The references to Paul's own plans and needs in ch. 15 are secondary.

At the same time, just because of the nature of the situation that caused Paul to write this epistle, the purpose for Romans includes the first view discussed above, namely, that it was intended to be a kind of doctrinal essay focusing on the meaning of salvation through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. As noted above, it is a systematic presentation of the *gospel*: not necessarily the gospel as proclaimed in an evangelistic situation, but the gospel as unfolded to mature Christians.

When this point is understood, we can see that the epistle to the Romans is intended not just for the saints in Rome in the middle of the first century A.D., but for all Christians in all ages. It is relevant for all since it deals with salvation from sin through God's grace (●I:47-48).

In most of the discussions of the purpose of Romans, a forgotten factor is the role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture. It is Paul himself who tells us that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Whatever circumstances led Paul to compose his letter to the Romans, the choice to write and the message he wrote were not his alone. The Holy Spirit worked through Paul to produce this letter (see 2 Pet 1:20-21), and the Holy Spirit knows more than any man what is needed by every sinner and by every Christian seeking peace and power. In the final analysis it is the Spirit of God, and not just the Apostle Paul, who speaks to our hearts in the epistle to the Romans.

VII. THE THEME OF ROMANS

It is generally recognized that the content of the epistle is doctrinal in nature. Its main body is an essay or treatise with a strong doctrinal emphasis and seems to be built around a particular theme. The question now is, exactly what *is* the theme of Romans? Several answers have been proposed.

A. Justification by Faith

The Reformation established a way of looking at Romans that still has considerable support among Protestants, namely, that the main theme of the epistle is stated in 1:16-17. It can be summed up in the familiar phrase, “justification by faith,” i.e., justification or righteousness before God comes through faith alone. However, many scholars today have rejected this traditional approach on the basis that too much of its subject matter simply does not relate to this subject, as Boers (78) says (●I:49).

B. The Righteousness of God

Those who are not satisfied with justification by faith as the theme for Romans sometimes opt for one that is very similar, namely, the righteousness of God (1:17).

Since the righteousness of God is integrally related to justification by faith, the two themes are sometimes confused. This is because one aspect of the theme of divine righteousness is that the righteousness of God is the basis for the personal justification of individual sinners (●I:50).

But most of those today who say that the righteousness of God is the theme of Romans are using the expression in a more comprehensive sense. For them it includes the idea of the divine righteousness as the basis for individual justification, to be sure. But in Romans, they say, the theme is more inclusive than this. It includes God’s righteousness as the basis not only of his dealings with individual believers, but also of his dealings with mankind in general and especially with the Jewish nation in the context of redemptive history.

The question raised by the indiscriminate offer of justification by faith to both Jews and Gentiles is whether God is being fair with the Jews, in view of all the special treatment he has already bestowed upon them and the special promises he has given them. Does the gospel’s “no partiality” principle bring God’s righteousness and faithfulness into question? Paul seems to be dealing with this issue especially in Rom 9–11.

Thus according to this view the theme of Romans is not just the salvation of man but the defense of God, with perhaps the greater emphasis falling on the latter (●I:50).

C. The Equality of Jews and Gentiles

A third view is that the theme of Romans is the equality of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. This is currently a popular view. It stems mainly from a certain reconstruction of the origin and development of the Roman church. It goes hand in hand with the idea that the letter is intended to deal with certain specific circumstances existing in Rome, especially the apparent disunity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. It recognizes that "the entire letter to the Romans is . . . permeated with Jew-Gentile issues" (Fiensy, *Introduction*, 230).

In its most general form this view says that the main emphasis of Romans is the universality of the gospel: there is just one way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike (☉I:51).

Interpreters differ as to the nature of the circumstances that led Paul to emphasize the theme of equality. Some say the Gentile Christians at Rome did not want to fully accept the Jewish Christians, so Romans is basically defending the right of the latter to full status in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, some say the problem in Rome was the status of the Gentile Christians (☉I:52).

Either way the subject is approached, the main point is the same: the principal theme of Romans is to demonstrate the equality of Jews and Gentiles with regard to God's saving grace.

D. Sinners Are Saved by Grace, Not Law

All of the themes discussed above are certainly present in Romans, and all are important. All of them contribute significantly to the main theme. But I believe none of them as such is the main point Paul is communicating to us in the epistle. Rather than seeing 1:16-17 as the thesis statement for Paul's treatise, I see it more or less as the starting point leading up to the thesis, which is 3:28: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

In the most general sense Paul's thesis relates to the *gospel*, since his desire to preach the gospel in Rome (1:15) is what led him to compose the epistle as a written version of his gospel. But since the gospel is the good news about salvation, also in a general sense the theme of Romans is *salvation*. And the manner in which sinners are saved, whether Jews or Gentiles, is the same: justification by faith. (☉I:53).

But the theme of Romans is more precise than this. Yes, sinners are justified by faith, but this means they are *not* justified by works of law, which is the only alternative. It is just as important to include the negative statement in the theme as the positive one.

In actuality, then, the basic theme of Romans is the contrast between law and grace as ways of salvation. This contrast is seen especially in 3:28, which (literally translated) says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." The contrast is stated succinctly in 6:14, "You are not under

law, but under grace.” *This* is the gospel, the good news of salvation. Certainly it is good news to know that God justifies us by faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. But in a real sense it is also good news to know that we are *not* justified by law-keeping: a way of salvation which is not only futile but which sinners in their hearts *know* is futile, and which thus leads only to self-deception or to despair (●I:53).

Thus Paul’s theme is indeed that we are saved by grace, *not* by law. Law is not a viable option as a means of salvation; the only way for sinners to be counted righteous before God is by grace. Yes, we are justified by faith, but not by works of law. Yes, the righteousness of God figures prominently in our justification, but in contrast to the righteousness of man. Yes, Romans does emphasize full equality regarding this way of salvation; Jews and Gentiles are saved the same way. Both are saved by grace and justified by faith as provided by the righteousness of God, but in contrast with every false way.

This contrast between law and grace as competing ways of salvation is not a matter of OT versus NT nor Old Covenant versus New Covenant, as if law were the way to be saved prior to Christ and grace is the way to be saved now that Christ has come. Also, the contrast between law and grace — **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT** — is not simply the Law of Moses versus the grace of Jesus Christ. No sinner has ever been saved nor can be saved by the law that applies to him, whether it be the Law of Moses for Jews under the Old Covenant, or some other comparable set of God’s commandments for anyone else in any other time. Every sinner who has been saved since the time of Adam has been saved by grace and not by law, and this will always be the case.

The problem that Paul addresses in the book of Romans is not one that confronts Jews only, nor Gentiles only. It is not a problem faced only by those who are under the Mosaic Law, nor only by those to whom the Mosaic Law does not apply. The problem being addressed is this: *As a sinner, how can I be saved?* It is a problem faced by Jews and Gentiles alike, and the solution is the same for both.

Perhaps even more significantly, the problem addressed in Romans is not one confronted only by unbelieving sinners. It is a problem that believers often wrestle with as well (e.g., the Judaizers). When we state the problem thus — “As a sinner, how can I be saved?” — we can break it down into two separate problems. First is the unbeliever’s problem: “How can I *become* saved?” The answer is: by grace through faith, not by works of law.³ Second is the believer’s continuing problem: “How can I *stay* saved?” And the answer is: by grace through faith, not by works of law.

This is why the epistle to the Romans has always been and always will be in a class by itself with regard to its impact on individuals and upon the church as a whole. Its basic theme is one that is always needed and always applicable, and one that will result in the highest praise to God the Redeemer once it is understood.

VIII. OUTLINE OF ROMANS

PROLOGUE – 1:1-17

- I. **Epistolary Greeting – 1:1-7**
 - A. **The Author Introduces Himself – 1:1**
 - 1. A Slave of Christ Jesus
 - 2. Called to Be an Apostle
 - 3. Set Apart for the Gospel of God
 - B. **The Gospel and the Old Testament – 1:2**
 - C. **The Subject of the Gospel Is Jesus – 1:3-4**
 - 1. The Two Natures of Jesus
 - 2. The Incarnation
 - 3. Messiahship
 - 4. The Two States of Jesus
 - 5. The Resurrection of Jesus
 - 6. The Son's Full Identity
 - D. **Paul's Apostleship – 1:5**
 - 1. The Origin of Paul's Apostleship
 - 2. The Character of Paul's Apostleship
 - 3. The Focus of Paul's Apostleship
 - 4. The Purpose of Paul's Apostleship
 - 5. The Goal of Paul's Apostleship
 - E. **The Recipients of Paul's Letter – 1:6-7a**
 - F. **The Blessing – 1:7b**
- II. **Personal Remarks – 1:8-15**
 - A. **Paul's Prayers for the Romans – 1:8-10**
 - B. **Paul's Desires Regarding Rome – 1:11-13**
 - C. **Paul's Debt to the Romans – 1:14-15**
- III. **Transitional Statement – 1:16-17**
 - A. **The Glory of the Gospel – 1:16a**
 - B. **The Power of the Gospel – 1:16b**
 - C. **The Scope of the Gospel – 1:16c**
 - D. **Faith and the Gospel – 1:16c**
 - 1. Faith Is a Condition for Salvation
 - 2. Faith Is Not the Only Condition
 - E. **The Heart of the Gospel – 1:17a**
 - F. **The Golden Text of the Gospel – 1:17b**

PART ONE: THE IMPOTENCE OF LAW AS A WAY OF SALVATION – 1:18-3:20

- I. **The Sinfulness of the Gentiles – 1:18-32**
 - A. **Universal Knowledge of God and His Law – 1:18-20**

- B. **Universal Rejection of the True God** – 1:21-25
- C. **The Utter Depths of Gentile Depravity** – 1:26-32
- II. **The Sinfulness of the Jews** – 2:1-3:8
 - A. **Jews Are under the Wrath of God, No Less Than the Gentiles** – 2:1-5
 - B. **God Will Be Partial to No One in the Judgment** – 2:6-11
 - C. **Under Law, the Criterion of Judgment Is Obedience Alone** – 2:12-16
 - D. **Jews Who Look to the Law for Salvation Are Condemned by Their Own Disobedience** – 2:17-24
 - E. **True Jewishness Is Identified Not by Circumcision but by the Inward State of the Heart** – 2:25-29
 - F. **Such Equal Treatment of Jews and Gentiles Does Not Nullify But Rather Magnifies God's Righteousness** – 3:1-8
- III. **Universal Sinfulness and Hopelessness Under Law** – 3:9-20

**PART TWO: THE ALL-SUFFICIENCY OF GRACE
AS A WAY OF SALVATION – 3:21-5:21**

- I. **Grace as Justification by Christ's Blood through Faith** – 3:21-31
 - A. **Righteousness through Faith Is Now Fully Revealed** – 3:21-23
 - B. **Sinners Are Justified by the Blood of Christ** – 3:24-26
 - C. **Sinners Are Justified by Faith Apart from Works of Law** – 3:27-28
 - D. **The Way of Grace Is Available to All** – 3:29-30
 - E. **Grace Lets Law Do Its Proper Work** – 3:31
- II. **Abraham: Paradigm of Grace** – 4:1-25
 - A. **Abraham Was Justified by Faith Apart from Works** – 4:1-5
 - B. **David Explains and Confirms Justification by Faith Apart from Works** – 4:6-8
 - C. **Membership in Abraham's Family Is by Faith, Not by Circumcision** – 4:9-12
 - D. **The Inheritance Promised to Abraham Comes by Faith, Not by Law** – 4:13-17a
 - E. **Faith Means Giving Glory to God and Believing His Promises** – 4:17b-22
 - F. **Those Who Believe like Abraham Are Justified like Abraham** – 4:23-25
- III. **Grace and Assurance** – 5:1-21
 - A. **Assurance of Personal Salvation** – 5:1-11
 - 1. **Justification by Faith Is the Key to Assurance** – 5:1-2
 - 2. **Tribulations of Believers Do Not Nullify Assurance** – 5:3-5
 - 3. **Christ Died for Us While We Were Still Sinners** – 5:6-8
 - 4. **Our Hope Is Even More Secure Now That We Are His Friends** – 5:9-11
 - B. **The All-Sufficiency of the Death of Christ** – 5:12-21
 - 1. **One Sin of One Man (Adam) Brought Sin and Death to All** – 5:12-14
 - 2. **Christ and His Sacrifice Are Greater Than Adam and His Sin** – 5:15-17
 - 3. **Christ's Cross Completely Cancels the Results of Adam's Sin** – 5:18-19
 - 4. **Grace Triumphs over Sin and Death** – 5:20-21

**PART THREE: THE ALL-SUFFICIENCY OF GRACE
GIVES VICTORY OVER SIN – 6:1–8:39**

- I. Objections to Grace Based on a Fear of Antinomianism – 6:1–7:13**
 - A. Does Grace Make Sin Irrelevant? NO! – 6:1-14**
 - B. Does Freedom from Law Mean We Are Free to Sin? NO! – 6:15–7:6**
 - 1. We Are Slaves to God – 6:15-23
 - 2. We Obey God from Our Hearts – 7:1-6
 - C. Does Grace Mean That Law Is Bad? NO! – 7:7-13**
- II. Grace Gives Victory over Sin – 7:14–8:13**
 - A. The Christian Continues to Struggle against Sin – 7:14-25**
 - 1. The Nature of the Struggle – 7:14-20
 - 2. The Source of the Struggle – 7:21-25
 - B. Victory over Sin Comes through the Holy Spirit – 8:1-13**
 - 1. God Frees Us from Sin’s Penalty and Power – 8:1-4
 - 2. Sin and Death Are Defeated in Us through the Holy Spirit – 8:5-13
- III. The Assurance of Final and Total Victory over the Fallen World – 8:14-39**
 - A. The Holy Spirit Marks Us as Sons and Heirs – 8:14-17**
 - B. The Redeemed Cosmos Is Our Inheritance – 8:18-25**
 - C. God Promises to Bring His Family through Earthly Trials – 8:26-30**
 - D. God’s Gracious Love Gives Us Unshakable Assurance – 8:31-39**

**PART FOUR: THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD
IN HIS DEALINGS WITH THE JEWS – 9:1–11:36**

- I. THE PROBLEM OF ISRAEL: THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF THE JEWISH NATION – 9:1-5**
 - A. Israel’s Agony: They Are Accursed – 9:1-3**
 - B. Israel’s Ecstasy: They Are Recipients of Unspeakably Glorious Privileges – 9:4-5**
- II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ETHNIC AND SPIRITUAL ISRAEL – 9:6-29**
 - A. Israel’s Situation and God’s Faithfulness – 9:6-13**
 - 1. God’s Word Concerning Israel Has Not Failed – 9:6a
 - 2. The Key to the Puzzle: The Existence of Two Israels – 9:6b
 - 3. Ethnic Israel Exists by God’s Sovereign Choice – 9:7-13
 - a. The Choice of Isaac – 9:7-9
 - b. The Choice of Jacob – 9:10-13
 - B. God’s Right to Choose and Use People without Saving Them – 9:14-18**
 - 1. God’s Righteousness Is Challenged – 9:14
 - 2. God’s Sovereignty in Election for Service – 9:15-16
 - 3. God’s Purposes Can Be Served by the Unsaved – 9:17-18
 - C. God Used Ethnic Israel to Produce Spiritual Israel – 9:19-29**
 - 1. The Objection – 9:19

2. Paul's Initial Rebuke of the Objector's Attitude – 9:20-21
3. Beyond Ethnic Israel to Spiritual Israel – 9:22-24
 - a. The Calvinist View
 - b. Seeing Paul through Non-Calvinist Eyes
4. Prophetic Confirmation of God's Purpose – 9:25-29

III. ISRAEL'S CHOICE OF LAW RATHER THAN GRACE – 9:30–10:21

A. Personal Righteousness versus the Righteousness of God – 9:30–10:3

1. The Reason for the Gentiles' Acceptance – 9:30
2. The Reason for the Jews' Lostness – 9:31-33
3. The Jews' Rejection of God's Righteousness – 10:1-3

B. Christ Alone Is the Source of Saving Righteousness – 10:4-13

1. An Either-Or Choice: Works-Righteousness or Faith in Christ – 10:4
2. The Futility of Law-Righteousness – 10:5
3. Saving Righteousness Comes through Trusting Christ's Works, Not Our Own – 10:6-10
4. God's Righteousness Is Available Equally to Jews and Gentiles – 10:11-13

C. The Jews Have Not Believed in Christ, and Their Unbelief Is Inexcusable – 10:14-21

1. The Necessary Prerequisites to Saving Faith – 10:14-15
2. Most Jews Have Not Believed the Gospel Message – 10:16
3. The Jews' Problem Is Not Ignorance but Stubbornness of Will – 10:17-21

IV. THE SALVATION OF GOD'S TRUE ISRAEL – 11:1-32

A. God's True Israel Is the Remnant Chosen by Grace – 11:1-6

1. God Has Not Rejected His People – 11:1-2a
2. God Had a Remnant of Believers in the OT – 11:2b-4
3. Those under Grace Are God's New Covenant Israel – 11:5-6

B. Unbelieving Israel Has Been Hardened – 11:7-10

C. The Hardening of Unbelieving Israel Becomes a Blessing for Both the Gentiles and the Jews – 11:11-16

D. The Olive Tree: A Metaphor of Judgment and Hope – 11:17-24

1. Words of Warning to Gentile Christians – 11:17-22
2. Words of Hope for Hardened Jews – 11:23-24

E. God's Plan for Israel's Salvation – 11:25-32

1. The Mystery of Israel's Salvation – 11:25-27
2. God's Continuing Love for Israel – 11:28-29
3. God's Ultimate Purpose Is Mercy – 11:30-32

V. DOXOLOGY: GOD'S WAY IS RIGHT – 11:33-36

PART FIVE: LIVING THE SANCTIFIED LIFE – 12:1–15:13

I. A CATALOGUE OF VIRTUES – 12:1–13:14

A. Grace Demands a Transformed Life – 12:1-2

- B. Using the Gifts of Grace for Unselfish Service** – 12:3-8
- C. Miscellaneous Moral Teaching** – 12:9-16
- D. Personal Vengeance Is Forbidden** – 12:17-21
- E. The Relation between Citizens and Government** – 13:1-7
- F. The Relation between Love and Law** – 13:8-10
- G. Walking in the Light** – 13:11-14
- II. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY IN MATTERS OF OPINION** – 14:1-15:13
 - A. Do Not Judge Others in Matters of Opinion** – 14:1-12
 - 1. We Should Accept All Whom God Has Accepted – 14:1-3
 - 2. We Answer to Our Lord and Not to Each Other – 14:4-9
 - 3. Each of Us Will Be Judged by God – 14:10-12
 - B. The Stewardship of Christian Liberty** – 14:13-23
 - 1. We Must Sacrifice Our Liberty for the Sake of the Weak – 14:13-15
 - 2. Do Not Allow What You Consider Good to Be Spoken of as Evil – 14:16-18
 - 3. We Must Do Only Those Things Which Build Others Up – 14:19-21
 - 4. Each Christian Must Be True to His Own Convictions – 14:22-23
 - C. Living in Unity and Hope** – 15:1-13
 - 1. Selfless Service Produces a Unified Witness – 15:1-6
 - 2. Through Christ's Selfless Service, Jews and Gentiles Glorify God Together – 15:7-12
 - 3. A Prayer That All Believers May Abound in Hope – 15:13

PART SIX: PERSONAL MESSAGES FROM PAUL – 15:14-16:27

- I. PAUL'S MINISTRY AS THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES** – 15:14-33
 - A. Reflections on His Past Service** – 15:14-22
 - B. His Plans for the Future** – 15:23-29
 - C. His Request for Prayer** – 15:30-33
- II. PAUL AND HIS FELLOW WORKERS** – 16:1-24
 - A. Commendation of Phoebe** – 16:1-2
 - B. Greetings to Individual Acquaintances** – 16:3-16
 - C. Warnings against False Teachers** – 16:17-20
 - D. Greetings from Paul's Companions** – 16:21-24
- III. CONCLUDING DOXOLOGY** – 16:25-27

NOTES

¹ See DeWalt, 13; Moser, iii. See the explanatory note at the beginning of the bibliography for my policy regarding citations in the text and in notes.

² Ordinarily, citations from the book of Romans will consist only of the chapter and verse numbers, without "Romans."

³ How baptism fits into this answer is discussed in our comments on 1:17 and 6:1-5.