



The Epistle to the Romans

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans has been enormously influential in the development of Christian faith, Christian theological reflection, and Christian practice. In 4th century Rome, St. Augustine ultimately embraced Christian faith when he heard a voice calling him to read from Romans 13. Twelve centuries later, Martin Luther found in Romans the heart of his radical reinterpretation of Christianity, which changed faith and practice for Protestants and Catholics alike. In the eighteenth century, when John Wesley heard Luther's "Preface to Romans" read aloud at Aldersgate, his heart was "strangely warmed" and Methodism was born. And Karl Barth, the most influential western theologian of the 20th century, fired the shot heard round the world – or at least round the church – with his radical new theocentric reading, *The Epistle to the Romans*.

Oddly, for such a historic and powerful letter, no one knows for sure why Paul wrote to the churches at Rome. When we read Galatians it is quite clear that Paul writes because he is upset about the fact that some of the Galatian (Gentile) Christians are taking on some of the requirements of the Jewish law as part of their own piety. When we read 1 Corinthians it is quite clear that there are factions in the Corinthian congregation and that Paul is seeking to persuade them to deeper unity in Christ. When we read Romans it is much harder to know what Paul hoped his letter would accomplish.

One reason we may have a hard time pinning down the precise function of this letter is that unlike all the other churches Paul addresses in his epistles, he did not found the church at Rome. More than that, he has never been to the church at Rome, and so he is writing to them sight unseen. They have heard of him and he has heard of them, and he knows many of the Roman Christians personally (see ch. 16), but he is not their apostle in the same way that he is apostle to the Corinthians and the Galatians.

This suggests that he may not be responding to the kind of concrete information that he clearly has received before writing his other epistles. He has not served these people as their leader and may not be consistently informed about what is going on in their midst. The fact that he did not found this church also engenders a kind of reticence in Romans. Paul has clear theological claims in mind and undoubtedly has clear ideas of how the Romans' faith should be lived out in practice, but he does not pretend to quite the same parental authority he exercises over his other churches (e.g., 1 Cor 4:15; Gal 4:19), nor perhaps to be so specific in his instructions on how to live out the faith.

The fact that Paul does not know the Roman community first hand suggests two possible reasons for the letter.

First, he wants them to know him and his faith. While Romans is not a work of systematic theology it does seem to present a kind of summary of some of the theological and exegetical claims that Paul wants the Romans to understand. He plans to visit them soon and the letter provides a kind of self-description that paves the way for his appearance among them.

There is a corollary to the claim that Paul writes a summary of his theology in Romans. Many have noticed that Paul seems to be dealing with precisely the kinds of issues he has dealt with in his earlier correspondence, especially Galatians and Romans. Again he wants to contrast faith with works of the law. Again he wants to suggest ways in which “weak” (very scrupulous) and “strong” (less scrupulous!) Christians can get along. Some have thought that in providing this description of his own theology Paul is acutely aware of the ways in which other churches have misinterpreted him and is trying to guard against such misinterpretations.

Second, Paul wants to establish his own apostolic authority. We do not get the sense, as we do with both the Corinthian letters and with Galatians, that people have been disputing Paul’s apostolic authority in Rome. Nonetheless it is important for him to make clear before he arrives that when he comes he will speak with the same authority as those apostles who actually did found this community of faith. And it is important to insist that what he writes in his letters carries the authority we would expect of an apostle.

An apostle is one sent (the Greek verb is *apostello*) to declare a message on behalf of his master. Paul’s master is Jesus Christ and his message is Christ’s message, interpreted for the Roman believers.

There is a corollary here as well. Toward the end of the epistle Paul tells the Romans the next two steps of his apostolic itinerary. In the near future he intends to go to Jerusalem in order to present an offering from the Gentile Christians to the “poor” among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. After that he proposes to set out on a westward trip to Spain – the far border of the known world – so that he might preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. (See Romans 15:22-29) He may be stressing his apostleship in part to encourage the Romans to provide him with both the prayerful and the material support that he will need for this ministry. (We do not know for sure whether Paul ever went on from Rome to Spain or not).

The third suggestion for why Paul writes to the Romans focuses on the issues that Paul raises in Romans chapters 9-11 and 14 and 15. Romans 9-11 is clearly concerned with the relationship between Gentile believers and Israel in God’s plan and promises. Chapters 14 and 15 are concerned with some kind of division in the church between those who are strong in faith and those who are weak. The issue apparently has to do above all with diet.

Some have thought that these two motifs are combined. Paul’s concern in Romans 9-11 is not just with Gentiles and Jews on the broad stage of human history. Paul is concerned with the relationship between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians in the Roman churches. The “weak” Christians, according to this proposal, are primarily the Jewish Christians who are concerned to keep kosher table as part of their faithful practice. The “strong” Christians are

primarily the Gentile Christians who do not feel bound by kosher dietary laws and who probably do not understand why their Jewish Christian friends cling to their old ways.

Some students of Romans have further suggested that there is an historical circumstance that explains the possible tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman churches. This theory is based on the historian Suetonius and on Acts 18. Apparently the emperor Claudius banned most of the Jews (including we presume, Jewish Christians) from Rome and some time later the emperor Nero invited them back.

The hypothesis is that in the absence of the Jewish Christians the Gentile Christians took over both the leadership of the churches and defined its rules and principles. When the Jewish Christians came back, bringing their traditions and their dietary concerns, tension mounted within each congregation, or perhaps between predominantly Jewish house churches on the one hand and predominantly Gentile house churches on the other. By this reading the great practical exhortation of the last part of Romans is Romans 15:7. "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you."

This interpretation has the advantage of bringing a great many of the themes of the Letter together as a response to a particular historical situation. It does seem curious, however, that Paul never mentions Claudius, Nero, or how nice it was for the Jewish Christians to get back to their Roman homes.

What Paul does mention, time after time, in diverse contexts and with diverse consequences, is that God is God of Jews and Gentiles alike, that God reaches out to redeem the whole creation through Jesus Christ, and that all people – Jew and Gentiles alike – are invited to respond to God's gracious invitation through faith.

Finally, as you begin your journey through this powerful, historic letter, we offer a friendly word of warning: those who have gone before you have rarely emerged from their own journeys through Romans unchanged.

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