

THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS AND THE UNITY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

What really is the purpose of that much-loved book of the Bible, Paul's letter to the Romans? What is the theme that holds it together? A careful look at the background and text of Romans shows that this letter has much to say about questions concerning the unity of God's people – then as well as today.

There is probably no letter of Paul more loved than his epistle to the Romans. It is to the famous eighth chapter that we turn when we want encouragement and insight into our lives as children of God, to the tenth when we want insight into Christian ministry, to the first when we look for insight into the ungodliness of our age, to the sixth when we want to be reassured about our union in Christ, in His death and resurrection.

So too in the life of the Christian church. Although Augustine never wrote a full-length commentary on this book, in his personal life and throughout his writings he shows himself so very indebted to the words of this book, and he goes on to become probably the theologian who exerted more worldwide influence than any other. And what about Martin Luther? What would have come of the Reformation without him? And what of his theology without Romans? Said Luther: *“This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.”*¹ Similarly, Calvin says: *“if we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.”*²

But yet, there are questions – many questions – that linger with respect to Romans. These questions. Is there actually one theme that unites it? What is Paul really trying to do here? Do we just have here a loose collection of precious thoughts, like some many pearls delightful because of each exquisite pearl? Or is there a thread that connects these pearls and so makes them even more delightful? One can think here of chapters 9 – 11; how many are not baffled by those chapters are really all about? How many preachers don't skip precisely over those chapters in a series of sermons on Romans?

Many approach Romans as if it is some sort of manual as to how to be saved; but in truth, it must be admitted, it goes off on all kinds of detours and tangents before it really answers those kind of questions.

¹ *Luther's Works: Lectures on Romans* Volume 25 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1972) 365. (as quoted by Schreiner, p.1).

² *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 5. (as quoted by Schreiner, p. 1).

Unsatisfied with that, scholars have long debated what might be its overriding theme, its dominant motive.³ Some have suggested that it could be considered a kind of a summary of Paul's thought, his systematic theology if you will. But we have to admit that if that's what it is intended to be, it falls far short of being a very good one. For really, despite having a wealth of doctrinal material, there's also a lot that it lacks. Where do we find here a well-articulated Christology, of a doctrine of the resurrection? Or an explicit theory about the nature of the church, or the Lord's Supper? And how much does he say about eschatology, the doctrine of last things?

The Background

Well, to address this, we first need to know something about the background of Romans.

From historical sources we can learn that already back in 63 BC, after the capture of Jerusalem, Pompey brought back a large number of Jewish prisoners to Rome to be sold as slaves. But, not too surprisingly, Jews did not make very good slaves; their obstinate adherence to the Jewish religion and customs contributed to their liberation. Julius Caesar, and subsequently Augustus, soon gave them privileges as well: liberty to worship, freedom from military service, exemption from certain taxes, the recognition of the Sabbath as a day of rest, the right to live according to the customs of their forefathers. It all meant a growing body of Jews in Rome, just as there was in Alexandria; one scholar estimates that there were about 10,000 Jews in Rome in 5 B.C. already; at some points, they even seem to have had control over a whole section of the city.⁴

Notwithstanding the special freedoms that Jews enjoyed however, it should be realized that their relationship with the emperors was not always peaceful. In 19 A.D., the Jews so fell under the displeasure of the reigning emperor Tiberius that he had some of them punished, others expelled from the city, and others enlisted for military service. In 41 A.D. Caligula incited a storm of opposition among the Jews when he attempted to set up a statue of himself in the Temple at Jerusalem; it would surely have led to much bloodletting if it were not for the fact that Caligula was assassinated around this time.

For our purposes, it should especially be noted that in 49 A.D., there seems to have been so much unrest among the Jews in Rome that Emperor Claudius banished all the Jews from the city of Rome.

³ See the articles in Karl P. Donfried, ed. *The Romans Debate*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Peabody: Hendricksen, 1991).

⁴ G. Edmundson, *The Church in Rome in the First Century* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913) 4-6. For example, Philo of Alexandria writes that in the time of Caesar Augustus "the great section of Rome on the other side of the Tiber is occupied and inhabited by Jews, most of whom were Roman emancipated citizens" (according to Lichtenberger, 2159). This area is referred to as Trastevere. Cf. H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*. Revised edition. (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1995).

We have at least two sources that speak about this.

One is a Roman historian by the name of Suetonius who wrote in his biography of Claudius that Claudius “*banished from Rome the Jews who were constantly in unrest as a result of the instigation of Chrestus*”. Chrestus seems to have been a common but somewhat ill-informed reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. So the uprising in Rome seems to have had something to do with the interaction between Jews and Christians.

Our other source on this event is the Scriptures, namely Acts 18: 2, where we read about Paul coming to Corinth and meeting up with Aquila and Priscilla “*who had recently come from Italy...because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.*”

There are also some other relevant texts in the book of Acts. From Acts 2, we know that there were also inhabitants of Rome in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (vs. 10-11: “*visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism).*” In Acts 12: 17, we also read how the apostle Peter fled from Jerusalem to escape from King Herod and “*left for another place.*” There are quite some exegetes who believe that this “other place” was Rome. And there is a strong and early tradition that says that Peter laboured for many years in Rome, possibly even being the one who founds the church there.⁵

But let us think about this: what would it mean when Emperor Claudius bans all the Jews from Rome? It would mean that the church at Rome suddenly finds itself *as a completely Gentile church*. The Jews have had to depart.

And what happens to the church in 54 A.D. when Claudius dies, and Nero the next emperor, revokes the decree allows the Jews to return? We get indications to that effect from Romans as well, for in Acts 18 Priscilla and Aquila are in Corinth, but in chapter 16 of Romans these two are at the very top of a list of people in Rome whom Paul wants to greet. Listen to Paul in Romans 16:2: “*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me.*”

But what this means is that the church (or the churches) in Rome has been stripped of its Jewish membership in 49 A.D. And then, much of the Jewish contingent returns after 54 A.D. And it is commonly believed that it is in 57 A.D. Paul writes this letter to the Romans!

Jew and Gentile

When we take note of that, then we understand why all kinds of Jew-Gentile questions are really front and center in this letter to the Romans.

Paul is dealing here not just with the effect of a change in redemptive history, wherein the God who for centuries has extended his grace and love to the Jews now extends it to Gentiles as well. In addition to that, Paul is dealing with

⁵ See Edmundson on this.

some of the concrete kind of problems that surfaced due to this population shift specific to the city of Rome.

It means that in that first century all kinds of Jew – Gentile questions necessarily become front and center.

Think of it. What would happen when the Jews were banished from Rome? The Christian church in its infancy was commonly lumped together with Judaism, and it was under that umbrella that it has permission to assemble.⁶ But all of a sudden, the Gentile Christians could no longer meet together under the protection of special Jewish religious and legal privileges as a “synagogue,” but they have to form their own assemblies and seek permission to do so.

But there are even deeper difficulties besides that.

Consider the kind of conclusions that Gentile Christians just might have drawn. The Romans were a proud people, their whole society built on the principle of deference to those who were higher, those whose blood was purer. “Snobbery begins at Rome”⁷ writes J.P.V.D. Balsdon. And if the Romans were at the top of the social rung, the Jews were at the bottom. “No pagan writer, Greek or Roman, had any great sympathy with the Jews.”⁸ They were regarded as a superstitious people, with strange customs: a recurring Sabbath, circumcision, dietary taboos, an exclusivistic religion which refused to acknowledge even the gods of the Romans.

So you can imagine that this Roman anti-Jewish sentiment would mean that many Romans would be quite glad to see the Jews depart in 47 A.D. and not very happy to see them return 7 years later.

It would even be easy for the Gentile Christians who remained in Rome to imagine that this was all part of God’s plan, “that God had somehow endorsed, at the theological level, what Caesar had enacted at the political level and that God had in fact written the hated Jews out of the covenant altogether.”⁹

And it is precisely from within the context of all this then that I believe we come to better understand the letter to the Romans.

Now it makes sense why says so emphatically and thematically: “*I am not ashamed of the gospel,*” – why? – ***because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile***” (18).

Now we begin to understand too why whenever Paul speaks about that central theme of justification by faith – he does it couched in this Jew-Gentile language. For instance, Romans 3:30: “*there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.*” For that

⁶ Hermann Lichtenberger shows that it was only at the time of Neronian persecution (64 A.D.) that the differences between Jews and Christians became clear to the Roman authorities. 2168

⁷ The heading of chapter two of Balsdon’s *Romans and Aliens* (University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 19.

⁸ *Romans and Aliens*, 67.

⁹ N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Romans* (Abingdon Press, 2002) 407.

matter, there is hardly a single issue that Paul brings up here without speaking about Jews and Gentiles.

Take for instance those famous chapters 9 – 11. Their intent is really not just to give us an insight into those mysteries of predestination and reprobation. Rather those mysteries are brought up precisely with a view to this Jew-Gentile question.

Is Paul's *Jewish reader* inclined to think that his is the preferred position? Already in chapter 2 and 3, he has dialogued extensively with the Jew who considers himself privileged because of his covenant status, his possession of the law (2:18,26; 3:2,9)? Israel is not the people of God according to the flesh, but according to the promise (9:8,9). And the promises of God involve faith (9:32), specifically faith in Christ (10:4). "Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel"(9:6)

Is Paul's *Gentile reader* inclined to think that all God's purposes for Israel are over and done with? Paul asks his kind of questions. 11:1: "*I ask then: did God reject his people? By no means!*" 11:11: "*Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all.*" When Gentiles too are tempted to become proud like the Jews, he has an answer for them too. Here's part of it. 11:17-19: "*if some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.*"

Do you see it then: these deep chapters are really all about the unity of God's people! Jew and Gentile – the one people of God. As he says in chapter 10: this is why there must be the Word that leads to faith: "*For there is **no** difference between **Jew** and **Gentile** – the same Lord is Lord of **all** and richly blesses **all** who call on him...*"(10:12).

There is also a very strong plea with respect to that unity in chapters 14 and 15, about how the strong need to accept the weak, about how a servant needs to be judged by his master rather than by his fellow servant, about how questions of food and drink and days are matters of conscience (14:5), about how there are matters that are outside of God's revelation concerning which Christians need to leave each other free, about how Christians have to accept each other as God has accepted them. Here the Jew-Gentile theme is a little less explicit – until we get to the end of this discussion (15:7-13), where it reverberates some five times beginning with this: "*Accept one another... For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy...*"(15:8).

And if it is obvious then that Romans 9 – 11 and 14 – 16 have to do with this Jew-Gentile situation of the Roman church, we ought not to think that this issue is not there in the earlier chapters. Are chapters 1- 8 just a long introduction until he gets to his real point? Certainly not.

As N.T. Wright has said:

“If he is to address the deep-rooted problems of the interrelationship between Jews and Gentiles within God’s purposes, Paul must go down to those deep roots themselves, to the foundation of Jewish and Christian thinking: to creation and fall, covenant and Torah, to Israel’s covenant failure and God’s covenant faithfulness. He must show how the death and resurrection of Jesus, the basic announcement of ‘the gospel,’ are God’s solution to the complex problems of Israel and the world and how these events have called into existence a people, composed of Jew and Gentile alike, led by God’s Spirit and defined not by Torah but by faith, in whom all the promises of God have come true....Only so can they appreciate the subtle logic of the argument that he then mounts.”

Time prevents us from going into detail here. Let me just mention this. If it is true, as some in the early church have suggested, that Peter was involved in Rome, and that it was Peter rather than Paul who laid the foundation here (15:20), it is no secret that Peter and Paul – at least at some times and to some degree – thought differently about the way in which Gentiles enter the church (Gal.2). And so what is it that Paul is attempting to do in writing to these Romans whom he has never visited? He is trying to assure them that the gospel he preaches is the true gospel, that those who oppose him are wrong. He must satisfy both Jewish and Gentile Christians that his stance on the Mosaic law, circumcision and the place of Israel is in accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures. Why must he do that? Not for the sake of his own ego, or personal glory. Precisely for the sake of unifying the church in Rome. This is why he labours so hard and writes so intently. What untold damage would happen to the churches at Rome and elsewhere if his ministry (or Peter’s!) is rejected, if different emphases lead to major divisions.

And what is the worst thing about such division? The worst thing is what it does to the cause of the glory of God. Unity is ultimately to be sought not for the people’s sake, but for God’s sake. Unity is to be prized so that the church worships God together in harmony. And so that others too might bring honour and praise to God’s name. That’s where Paul’s discussion in Romans 9 – 11 ends up (11:33-36); that’s the goal of Romans 14 – 15 (15:7-13). That’s why he writes about journeying to Jerusalem with the proceeds of the collection (it’s not about the money...it’s about the Jews sharing in the material blessings of the Gentiles just as the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, (15:27). That’s why he would have the Roman church stand behind him as he goes on to Spain with the gospel; the salvation of more Jews and Gentiles brings honor to God’s name. Disunity is dishonourable to Him, but unity is ever so honourable to the God who is One. Paul has rightly been called “Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ.”¹⁰ That’s even the final note of the letter. The revelation of the mystery of God in Christ has

¹⁰ See Thomas R. Schreiner’s fine work, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001).

been made known “*so that all nations might believe and obey him -- to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!*”(16:26-7).

And that’s the note I’d like to end on.

Today too there are discussions about unity.

Given this perspective on Romans, how we would do well to listen to this servant of God who so laboured for unity. There are lessons to learn here. Think of how he distinguishes in Romans 14 and 15 between things that are peripheral and things that are essential. What is he saying but this: that we have no right insisting on things that God Himself does not insist on. Oh, we can try and we will try if we confuse uniformity with unity. But the unity that matters is the unity we have in Christ.

It brings us right back to the basics. Why do we refer to our confessions as “Three Forms of Unity”? Aren’t we saying that while there will continue to be discussion and growth on many issues, on these points we are and must be united? Isn’t that also saying that on other points, we do well to “accept one another”(15:7), to bear patiently with each other, and to strive for unity?

Baynard: unity....

Why? Precisely because of the glory of God!

Think of it: how much dishonour to God – all these various denominations. How that must give unbelievers reason to scoff about those Christians who can’t get it together, so hopelessly divided!

And conversely, how much more glory to God if this should happen: Christian churches growing closer together – even beginning to visibly manifest a deep and inner unity. It would be a rare thing in our age. And so, it would give so much glory to God.

And the truth is: there is no greater reason to keep the process going than this: the glory and the praise of God.

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