

# Why Romans?

Why did Paul write Romans? There is an answer to that question which makes luminous sense of the letter, and which shows why Romans is so vital to our churches today. It is everywhere in the text; yet, for some reason, is not spotted in many major commentaries.

Quite clearly, Paul must have had a good reason for writing. It is obvious from the greeting at the start (1:8-13) and the personal messages towards the end (16:1-15) that he had a real church and particular people in mind. As Christopher Ash has put it, "Paul did not sit down one sunny afternoon with nothing much to do and say to himself, 'I think it would be nice to jot down some edifying Christian thoughts and send them to those friendly brothers and sisters in Rome; they might be interested.'"<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, the Apostle had a specific and urgent purpose, which turns out to be just as important for us now as it was when he wrote.

What was his purpose? Several fine commentaries draw attention to clues in the letter itself which point to two possible motives. First, Paul tells the Romans that he wants to visit them on his way to missionary work in Spain (16:23-29). Clearly, he is seeking their partnership in this venture, and nothing will do more to promote that than confidence in him and a passion for the gospel he preaches: so he writes the letter to explain that gospel to them. Secondly, Paul's delicately nuanced approach to the "weak" and the "strong" in chapters 14-15 hints at tensions in the Roman church, possibly between Gentile and Jewish Christians. Again, Paul's answer to this is to preach the gospel, for there is no greater unifier and leveller than

the gospel of God's free grace in Christ. Thus, it is argued, mission and unity are the book's two great drivers; seeing this gives two great reasons for preaching Romans, and a steer on how to apply it.

## Digging deeper

There is surely much truth in these explanations, but do they really account for the shape and force of the letter? Or does Paul have an even more profound reason for writing? Consider the following:

- (1) *The angle on the gospel* that Paul takes in some sections does not obviously relate to either mission or unity. An example is the huge block of material answering the charge of antinomianism in chapters 6-7.
- (2) The letter very obviously has *the gospel itself* as its overwhelming theme. It is topped (1:1-6) and tailed (16:25-27) with strong assertions about the gospel, as if to say, "this is my subject". It is clear from his introduction that Paul longs to preach this gospel to the church in Rome (1:15). Since he has been prevented from doing so in person (1:13), the implication is that he is now doing so by letter.
- (3) There is a strong undercurrent of *defence of the gospel* running right through the letter. Right at the start, the Apostle tells his readers, *I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation* (1:16). Why might he - or his hearers - be tempted to be ashamed, if it is not because the gospel is being threatened, criticised or undermined? In 16:17-18 he warns his readers about false teachers. Is not

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2009, vol 1 p28).

Paul writing to defend his gospel from critics, and to prevent people from being led astray into other versions of the Christian message?

- (4) Indeed, there are many specific points in the letter at which Paul appears to be *answering questions about his gospel*, some of which may have come from the mouths of critics. In 3:8 he refers to a slander against his preaching. In 3:31 he is clearly answering the accusation that this gospel is out of line with the OT. In 6:1 and 6:15 he addresses obvious ways in which the message of God's free grace could be misunderstood (and for which it may be being criticised). The two questions in chapter 7 (verses 7, 13) could easily have arisen as either accusations against Paul's gospel preaching, or at least misunderstandings of his position. Several times in chapters 9-11 (9:6, 14, 19, 30-32; 11:1, 11) he looks as if he is replying to objections to his gospel, either potential or actual.

### **Paul's vital purpose**

In the light of this, the letter's own evidence suggests that Paul writes *to explain and defend his gospel*.

Paul has been unable to visit the imperial capital, but mindful of its influence, including the international reputation of the Christians there (1:8), he is urgently concerned that they hear (and transmit?) the true gospel accurately. If they have only had it second-hand, they could easily misunderstand it. They might be swayed by critics who regarded Paul's gospel as unbiblical, or who raised questions about it they were unable to answer. Without a secure foundation, they might be vulnerable to altogether different accounts of the Christian message. Now, knowing that he faces personal danger in

his forthcoming trip to Judaea (16:31), Paul is urgently concerned to give them a full explanation and defence of the gospel of grace while he has opportunity. In other words, the Apostle's purpose is even deeper than mission and unity (vital though those are!); *it is to protect the Roman church by ensuring they understand and go on trusting the very gospel itself*.

In a sense, however, the whole Bible is about the gospel, so can we find more specifically why Paul needs to explain and defend his gospel? There are some strong hints. His repeated emphasis on the OT support for his position suggests he is sensitive to the charge that his gospel is an unbiblical innovation. The length of time Paul spends on answering the question of God's purposes for His historic people in chapters 9-11 might be because he has critics who accuse his gospel of making a nonsense of God's promises.

But above all, it is surely the scourge of legalism (justification by works) in its various forms that Paul has in view. His frequent use of the word νόμος, *law*, in the letter (an astonishing 74 times) hints that this is his focus. It is striking just how fully Romans is shot through with strongly anti-works-righteousness comments (for example, 1:17, 3:20, 3:27-28, 4:4-5, 4:13, 6:14, 7:6, 8:3, 9:16, 9:32, 10:3, 11:6). We know, of course, from elsewhere in the NT that works-righteousness in one form or another was a recurring threat to the churches the Apostle founded. With this in mind we may sharpen our understanding of his primary purpose: *he wants his readers to hold on to the vital news of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, and not abandon it for works-righteousness*.

He does this in four ways:

1. He *explains* the gospel, that it might be understood (and not misunderstood);

2. He *persuades* his hearers of its absolute necessity as God's power for salvation, in contrast to the law, which cannot save;
3. He *defends* it against actual and potential critics;
4. He *applies* it to individuals and to the church, that they might live it out.

These four strands run right through the letter, though each is prominent in different places. It is typical of the first eleven chapters for Paul to explain, then defend, and then, in the course of that defence, to explain some more.

### **The structure of the letter**

If this understanding of the purpose of the letter is correct, we should see it worked out in the flow of the text. What do we find?

After his introduction, setting out unmistakably that his theme is the gospel of which he is not ashamed, and which is about righteousness by faith, Paul explains our great, universal, problem: the wrath of God (1:18-32). Next, he shows how religion isn't the answer (2:1-3:20). By 3:20 we have seen the absolute necessity of the gospel of free grace in Christ, and had the position of the legalist totally undermined.

Next, in what Leon Morris memorably calls "possibly the most important paragraph ever written",<sup>2</sup> Paul shows how the cross of Christ is God's answer: His just way of justifying the unjust, presenting Christ as a *propitiation by his blood* (3:21-26). This is for Jew and Gentile alike, and testified to by *the Law and the Prophets*. The result: no boasting - Paul's very first application is to the legalist!

In chapter 4, the Apostle establishes the OT basis of the righteousness which God imparts to those who trust Christ, and in so doing also sketches what a proper response of faith looks like. In chapter 5 he explains what Christ has achieved for us: Paul wants his readers to be assured that the gospel really delivers.

Chapters 6-7 seem principally to be answering the charge that Paul's gospel is antinomian. The Apostle explains why, far from encouraging licence, the gospel of grace should actually lead to righteous living. He goes on to show how, in fact, the very assumption that one would be godlier trying to live "by law" is, in fact, totally false. What good news it is that we have been released from it!

Chapter 8 is about Christian assurance, as its opening and closing paragraphs indicate. Paul explains how and why we can be sure we are in the right with God, and how the greatest challenge to our assurance (our suffering) can be faced. Here is Paul's pastoral concern in defending his hearers against legalism, for religion often finds a fertile seed-bed where assurance is weak.

Chapters 9-11 obviously address the question of God's promises and the Jews - a massive potential objection to a gospel of free grace for the Gentiles which has spread against a background of rejection by God's historic people. Paul addresses this from the perspectives of both God's sovereignty and human responsibility. But this section is not just about Jew and Gentile - it is also about works and faith.

From chapter 12 onwards, Paul draws out some implications of the gospel of grace for our practical living. We are, individually and corporately, to live gospel-shaped lives, viewing ourselves by

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris: *The Epistle to the Romans* (Leicester: IVP, 1988) p123.

the gospel (12:3). Chapter 13, on submission to the governing authorities, seems like a surprising excursion, but perhaps Paul is guarding against a potential accusation that his gospel promotes lawlessness.

Chapters 14-15 address the problem of the “weak” and the “strong” in the Roman congregation. One might expect an anti-legalist simply to support the “strong”, but the radical gospel of God’s free acceptance of us in Christ means that we must accept one another (15:7).

Finally, 15:14-16:27 give Paul’s plans, greetings, and concerns.

What, then, is the centre and heart of the letter? It is surely, as Cranfield proposes,<sup>3</sup> 3:21-26 (and not, as has been suggested by some, chapters 9-11 or 14-15). In a sense, everything before leads up to that paragraph, and everything that follows flows from it.

### **The implication for us**

How urgently we need Romans! It is certainly true that the churches need to be galvanised for mission, and that unity is a vital concern. But nothing is more fundamental than the gospel itself. And that gospel is humbling (3:27) and counter-intuitive (11:33-36), hence easily lost.

When we say to people that our greatest need is rescue by God from His wrath, which has been provided uniquely by Christ’s self-substitution, to be received freely by all who trust in Christ, but only by them, and that the church’s most urgent task is to proclaim this, we are telling them something which many don’t like. When we say that we can never come to God through our own goodness or religion, we are asserting something which is both humbling and deeply unpopular. Since

what is unpopular in the world is always in danger of becoming unpopular in the churches, we begin to redefine the gospel, and subtly shift the focus onto what we do for God rather than what He has done for us. We begin to think that any sincere religion will do; we become worksy, or churchy, or pluralist - and lose the true gospel in this, or some other, way.

Church history illustrates this tendency to drift away from the gospel of justification by faith alone. This has happened even among those who push mission and unity (the sad history of the Student Volunteer Movement in the early Twentieth Century being an example). But equally, time and again, history proves how it has been Romans which has ridden to the rescue!

Just as Paul wrote the letter to explain and defend the gospel to the Roman church, so we, too, need this letter just as much if we are to hold on to the gospel today. We need, then, to make sure that every Christian and every church is versed in this great letter - that they may be strengthened *according to my gospel* (16:25). There is a case for making Romans a training course for everyone, as some churches wisely do.

A final word: Romans is served by numerous massive commentaries, whose sheer length can make us lose sight of the wood for the trees, and give the impression that the letter is only for the expert. Paul evidently did not intend that: his list of greetings in chapter 16 includes two common slaves’ names! If we grasp the great purpose and theme of Romans, we really can teach it to non-experts (1:14), with much clarity and power.

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<sup>3</sup> C E B Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), p68.