

ROMANS

Introduction

“Paul’s letter to the Romans is a kind of Christian manifesto ... It is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament.” – John Stott

“really the chief part of the New Testament, and ... truly the purest gospel ... It is worth 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.” – Martin Luther

“if we have gained true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.” – John Calvin



Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430)

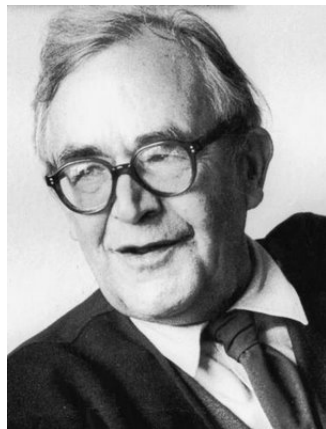
This letter has had a profound life-changing impact on a number of Christian leaders in the different centuries. Augustine of Hippo, in AD 386, convicted by the verses in Romans 13:13-14 repented of his life of sexual passions, gave his life fully to God and became the greatest Latin Father of the early church.

In the 16th century a brilliant professor found freedom for his tormented conscience when his spiritual eyes were opened to understand Romans 1:17.

After many nights and days of struggle Martin Luther finally “grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, He justifies us by faith.”



Martin Luther (1483 – 1546)



Karl Barth (1886 – 1968)

A third Christian leader impacted by Romans took place early in the 20th century. This person was Karl Barth who is considered to be among the most important Christian thinker of that century. But in his younger days Barth was a liberal theologian who believed in human progress and social change. But the horrific carnage and bestiality of World War 1, and his reflection on the message of Romans, were enough in combination to shatter the illusions of liberal optimism.

These are just a sample of many other leaders of Christianity that has been impacted by Romans but its influence is not confined to such giants. Ordinary men and women have also been affected by this letter.

How to read Romans

Many older commentators tended to assume that Paul was providing in Romans a compilation of Christian doctrine, somewhat detached from any particular socio-historical context. Contemporary scholars, on the other hand, have tended to over-react to this, and to focus on the transient situation of writer and reader. But the right approach to reading Romans is to see that both these aspects are present in the letter. It is a manifesto of the Christian faith and Paul wrote it to deal with the circumstances in the Roman church.

As a letter, Romans was written on a specific occasion and is an act of communication between two parties: the apostle Paul and the Roman Christians. To aid our reading of Romans we need to learn more about both parties.

The Author: Paul the Apostle

Information on the author comes especially from the beginning and the end of the letter. Paul did not found the Roman church, nor has he ever visited there. He has gotten to know some of the Roman Christians during his travels (16:3-15), but many of them he has never met. This may explain why he spends a little more time than usual introducing himself and explaining why he writes to a church that some would claim he has no authority over.

The Roman Christians

There is no direct evidence about the way the gospel was first planted in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally claimed that Peter was the founder of the church. But the earliest claim comes fairly late, in A.D. 354 (in the *Catalogus Liberianus*). And if Peter had founded the church in Rome, it is unlikely that Paul would have written to the Roman Christians without making any reference to him (see Rom 15:20). A most likely tradition on how the church in Rome got started would be from a fourth-century father called Ambrosiaster. He wrote that the Romans “have embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, without seeing any sign of mighty works or any of the apostles.” It is possible that the Jews who embraced Jesus as the Messiah at Pentecost (A.D. 30 or 33) brought their new faith back with them to Rome and so planted the church there.

At its beginning the Roman church was mainly Jewish but some time in A.D. 49 emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. This was because of a riot caused by Jews fighting over someone named “Chrestos” – almost certainly a corruption of the name *Christos*, “Christ.” But after Claudius death in A.D. 54, the edict was withdrawn, and Jews began returning to Rome. During the five years of the Jewish exile the church in Rome would have become



Emperor Claudius (10 BC – AD 54)

exclusively Gentile and thus led by Gentiles. When the Jews started returning the Roman church would also begin to have Jewish Christians within her, but as a significant minority. The assimilation of a sudden influx of new people from a rival ethnic group was not easy. This coupled with the possibility of some Jewish Christians wanting back their leadership roles would have created some tension between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman church. This may explain one of the main purposes of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians.

The letter itself doesn't tell us much about the Roman Christians but three important facts about them do emerge from these verses.

- First, there was more than one "local church" in the city of Rome. This is because of the way he address this letter. Instead of writing to the "church" in Rome, as in his other letters (compare, e.g., 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thes 1:1), he writes "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (1:7). These were small congregations that gathered in the homes of certain Christians to form house churches. Evidenced for this comes from the greetings in Romans 16:3-16 where Paul sends greetings to the "church" that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (v 5).
- Second, Paul views the Christians in Rome as being within the sphere of his special mandate: the Gentiles. In 1:13 Paul's reference to "*other* Gentiles" makes it clear that he views the Roman Christians as Gentile also. The same point emerges from 1:5-6

"⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ," (ESV)

Paul's point is to remind the Roman Christian that they are included in that category of people – the Gentiles – for whom God gave Paul a special calling.

- Third, Paul is also writing to Jewish Christians. This is indicated
 - From the greetings where he names several Jewish Christians: Priscilla and Aquila (16:3), Andronicus and Junias (16:7), and Herodion (16:11).
 - When Paul's identifies a common ancestry with his audience – "Abraham, our forefather" (4:1), and addresses his audience as those "who know the law."
 - By the fact that he explicitly addresses Gentile Christians (11:13-32) which suggests that his audience include some who are not Gentile.

But if Paul did write to Jewish Christians isn't this contradictory to him addressing the church in Rome as Gentile?

The best way to reconcile these points is to conclude that Gentiles had become a significant enough majority in the Christian community that it could be considered Gentile, yet Jews still made up a solid minority.

The Place and Time of the Letter

This letter was written at the end of Paul’s three-month stay in Greece at the close of his third missionary journey, just as he was getting ready to sail for Syria. We know this because in 15:25-27 Paul writes that he is on his way to Jerusalem with the collection for the impoverished Jewish Christians there. And after he has completed this task he hoped to go to Spain and visit the Roman Christians on the way. This corresponds with the narratives in Acts 19:21; 20:2-3.

Romans is dated about A.D. 57. This is deduced from two facts.

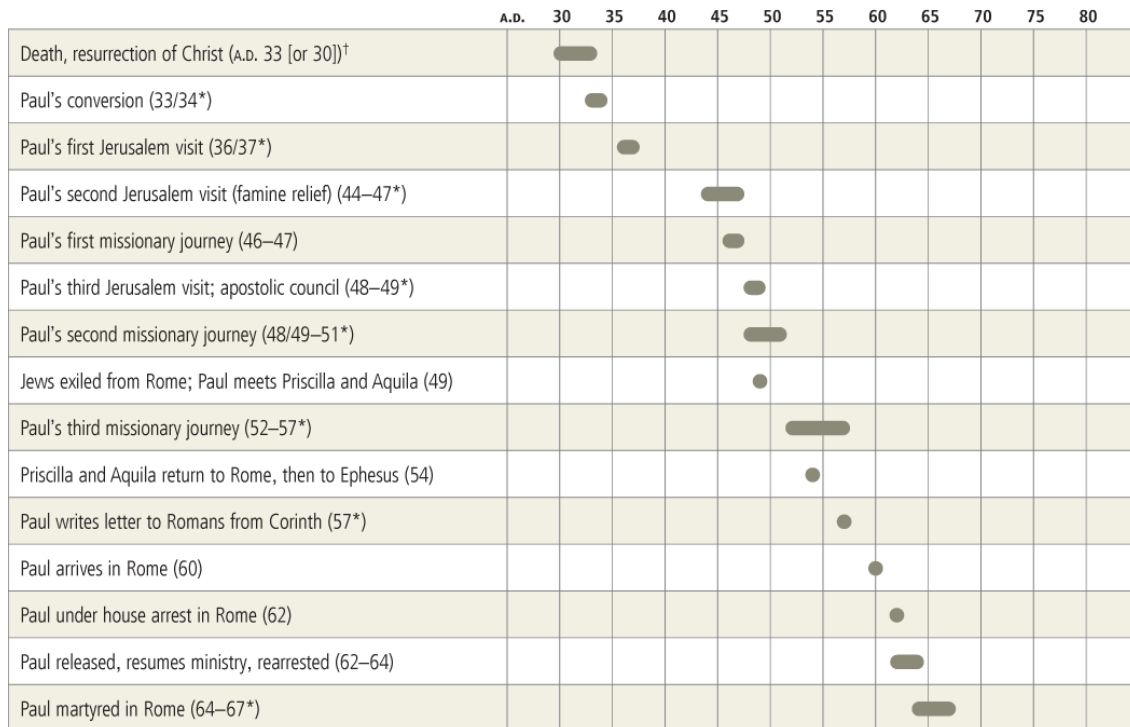
1. In Acts 21:33 we are told Paul was imprisoned shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem and remained there for two years until Governor Felix is succeeded by Festus (Acts 24:27).
2. This change of leadership most probably occurred in A.D. 59.

As to the place where this letter was written it was most probably in Corinth. This is because of Paul’s reference to the greetings sent by Erastus, the director of public works of the city from which he was writing (16:23). There is an inscription discovered in Corinth that bears the name of an individual with the precisely the same name and position. The other evidence is the correlation between Paul’s instruction to the church in Corinth to get the collection for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem ready before he arrives (1 Cor 16:1-7) and his sharing with the Roman church that at the point of his writing to them he was on his way to Jerusalem with the collection for the poor Christians there (Rom 15:25-26).



Paul’s third missionary journey (Acts 18:23 – 21:17)

Timeline



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

The Theme of Romans

The dominant theme in Romans is suggested by the word “gospel.” In Romans, Paul sets forth the good news of Jesus Christ. This gospel or “good news” says to the individual: God in Christ has made it possible to overcome the terrible and the deadly power of sin and to enter into an intimate and eternal relationship with God. But because these individuals belong to different ethnic groups i.e. Jews and Gentiles, Romans also has a lot to say as to how the gospel relates to both these groups.

There are two key passages in the first chapter of this letter that will help us to examine this theme more closely i.e. 1:1-5 and 1:16-17.

The Gospel Regarding God’s Son (1:1-5)

In verse 1 Paul says that he is “*set apart for the gospel of God*” (v. 1). Paul might be claiming that God appointed him from birth. Or he might be thinking of his being “set apart” at the time of his vision on the road to Damascus, which was a call to ministry as well as to salvation. But in either case what is important is Paul’s focus on the gospel. The word “gospel” has OT roots particularly in Isaiah where “preaching good news” is associated with the day of salvation (Is 52:7). “Gospel” can have an active sense of proclaiming good news, or a more static nuance whereby it denotes the work of God accomplished in Christ.

This gospel was “*promised beforehand* through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (v. 2). Paul indicates that this “gospel of God” is in continuity with the revelation of the same God in the OT. In Romans Paul stresses that God’s work in Christ for all people is exactly what he had promised from the beginning (3:21; chs. 4, 9-11). The OT and its law fit smoothly with the gospel in a single plan of God.

This gospel is about “*God’s son*” (vv. 3-4). By calling Jesus God’s Son, Paul connects Him with OT predictions about a coming king, or messiah (2 Sm 7:14; cf. also Ps 2:7). This title also suggests Jesus’ unique and intimate relationship to the Father (Rom 5:10; 8:3, 32). After introducing Jesus as God’s Son, Paul continues,

“who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead”(ESV)

Here Paul is stating not so much the two natures of Christ but the two stages of His existence. As God’s Son, Jesus came to earth as David’s descendant and accomplished the work of the Messiah; but after His resurrection, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, He entered into a new stage of existence, “*Son of God in power.*” Jesus, who has existed from eternity as Son of God, became the God-man reigning in messianic power (“Son of God” was a Jewish title for the Messiah) and this reign began (i.e. was declared) at a certain time in salvation history, i.e., when Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus now reigns over a kingdom in which redeemed men and women can experience the new power of the “age to come.”

This gospel is to be responded with an “*obedience of faith*” (v 5). For Paul, genuine Christian faith always carries with it, right from the beginning, the call for obedience. The call to believe in the Lord Jesus, and calling Jesus “Lord” means that one is committed to doing what Jesus commands. Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin. One cannot have true faith without obedience, nor can one truly obey without believing.

The Gospel and the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

In these verses Paul explains the nature of the power of the resurrected Christ. These verses function as the hinge between the letter’s introduction and its body. They introduce the theme of the argument that follows in the book and are therefore very important in understanding the letter as a whole. Paul’s argument unfolds in three steps (paraphrased):

1. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.
2. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel *because* the power of God for salvation is revealed in it (salvation that is available to everyone who believes, both Jew and Greek).
3. The gospel has power to save *because* the righteousness of God is revealed in it (a righteousness based on faith).

Not Ashamed of the Gospel

Why did Paul begin this paragraph with so defensive a statement? One possibility is he might simply be using the literary device of litotes, whereby one uses an understated negative formulation to make a positive point (e.g. “I am not without some ability at hockey” = “I’m a

pretty good hockey player”). But Paul might well be expressing how well he knew the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel. He knew that the message of the cross is “foolishness” to some and a “stumbling block” to others (1 Cor 1:18, 23), because it undermines self-righteousness and challenges self-indulgence. So whenever the gospel is faithfully preached, it arouses opposition, often contempt, and sometimes ridicule.

The Power of God for Salvation of Everyone Who Believes

In the argument of Romans that follows, there are two points about this salvation that is especially important

1. This salvation has both negative and positive aspect i.e. saved *from* sin and death and saved *to* restored fellowship with God.
2. This salvation is accomplished only when God has finished his work for us at the end of history. Paul usually do not use “save” and “salvation” in the sense of initial conversion rather he applies these terms to the ultimate rescue from God’s wrath and deliverance into the eternal kingdom at the end of history (Rom 5:9, 10; 13:11). The gospel and the power that it releases are not intended only to convert the sinner but also to transform that sinner and rescue him or her from every possible worldly and satanic threat.

This salvation is for “everyone who believes.” The “everyone” motif is a critical subtheme in Romans. The gospel has a universal applicability whereby salvation is offered to the Gentile as well as to the Jew. But we should note the “first ... then” part of Paul’s assertion. The inclusion of Gentile has not alienated the Jew, or even pushed the Jew out of first place in God’s purposes and plans. The gospel is, after all, “the gospel of God ... promised beforehand ... in the Holy Scriptures” (1:1-2). It does not and cannot take away the legitimate rights of the Jewish people granted to them by God himself in the OT.

The Righteousness of God

This phrase occurs eight times in Romans (see also 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3 [twice]) and only once elsewhere in Paul’s letters (2 Cor 5:21). What is this righteousness of God? Scholars have debated over the various interpretation of this phrase but in the context of Paul’s intention here, the righteousness of God is interpreted as *the act of putting people in the right performed by God*. The gospel brings salvation to people because it reveals God’s promised way of putting people into right relationship with Himself.

This “putting ... in the right” that God is carrying out is a forensic act. That is, it does not mean that people are “made right” in a moral sense but that they are “declared to be in the right” in a judicial sense. In the gospel God acts first of all to rescue sinners from condemnation because of sin and to declare them innocent before Him all those sins. “Moral” righteousness inevitably must follow upon forensic righteousness (Rom 6). But the two are not the same, and the legal standing precedes the transformed lifestyle.

Paul concludes these verses with an emphasis typical of the argument of Romans: faith. Paul makes it clear that it is only those who believe who will experience God’s righteousness. The

importance of faith is emphasised in the phrase “by faith from first to last.” And this importance is reiterated with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 – “The righteous will live by faith.” But in the light of the argument of Romans this quotation could be translated as “The one who is righteous by faith will live.”

The Purpose of Romans

Paul in his letter did not explicitly say what the main reason is in writing to the Roman Christians. But from the contents of Romans and the view that this is an epistle, scholars have suggested two possible reasons. These suggestions can be categorised into two main focuses, (1) on Paul’s circumstances and (2) on the Roman church.

- *Paul’s Circumstances*

Paul writes Romans to introduce himself to the Roman church. He goes to great length on this because he has never visited them before and is aware of the false rumours about the gospel he preaches that have reached them. By defending himself against such charges he hopes to enlist their support for his mission to Spain via Rome (15:24). Paul’s intention was make Rome the base of operation by which he could proclaim the gospel in Spain. He needed the Christians in Rome to rally around his gospel, especially on the issues being debated among Jews and Gentiles. If they did not then they would not support his proposed mission to Spain.

- *The Situation in the Roman Church*

In this proposal the argument is that Romans should be treated as a real letter – not a doctrinal treatise, not a personal meditation, but a letter, written to real people with real problems. Thus the reason Paul writes is to address the dire circumstances in the Roman Christian community. The problem there was division in the church where the two parties, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, were disputing over the place of the Mosaic law in their community. Paul appeals to them for unity in the church. Chapters 1-11 lays the theological foundation for his general appeal in chapters 12-13 and his direct appeal for unity in 14:1-15:13.

The Structure of Romans

I. The Letter Opening (1:1-17)

- A. Prescript (1:1-7)
- B. Thanksgiving and occasion: Paul and the Romans (1:8-15)
- C. The theme of the letter (1:16-17)

II. The Heart of the Gospel: Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)

- A. The Human Dilemma (1:18-3:20)
 - 1. God's wrath against sinners (1:18-32)
 - 2. Jews are "without Excuse" (2:1-3:8)
 - a. The Jews and the judgment of God (2:1-16)
 - b. The limitations of the covenant (2:17-29)
 - c. Jewish privileges and their limitations (3:1-8)
 - 3. Concluding indictment: all are "under Sin" (3:9-20)
- B. Justification by faith (3:21-4:25)
 - 1. Justification and the righteousness of God (3:21-26)
 - 2. "By faith alone" (3:27-4:25)
 - a. Justification and the law (3:27-31)
 - b. The faith of Abraham (4:1-25)

III. Life and Hope in Christ (5:1-8:39)

- A. Rejoicing in life and hope (5:1-21)
 - 1. From justification to salvation (5:1-11)
 - 2. Eternal life in Christ, the Second Adam (5:12-21)
- B. Freedom from the power of sin (6:1-23)
 - 1. Released from Sin's power through union with Christ (6:1-14)
 - 2. Freed from Sin, enslaved to God (6:15-23)
- C. Freedom from the law (7:1-25)
 - 1. Released from the bondage to the law through the death of Christ (7:1-6)
 - 2. The history and experiences of Jews under the law (7:7-25)
 - a. The coming of the law (7:7-12)
 - b. Life under the law (7:13-25)
- D. Hope through the Spirit (8:1-30)
 - 1. The Spirit of life (8:1-13)
 - 2. The Spirit of adoption (8:14-17)
 - 3. The Spirit of glory (8:18-30)
- E. Response: Celebration of our security in Christ (8:31-39)

IV. Relationship Between Israel and the Gospel (9:1-11:36)

- A. The problem: the conflict between God's promises and Israel's plight (9:1-5)
- B. The nature of God's promise to Israel (9:6-29)
 - 1. The Israel within Israel (9:6-13)
 - 2. Objections answered: the freedom and the purpose of God (9:14-23)
 - 3. God's calling of a new people: Israel and the Gentiles (9:24-29)
- C. Israel, the Gentiles, and the righteousness of God (9:30-10:21)
 - 1. God's righteousness versus "their own" righteousness (9:30-10:13)
 - 2. Israel's failure to believe (10:14-21)
- D. God's continuing faithfulness to Israel: the remnant (11:1-10)
- E. God's continuing faithfulness to Israel: "All Israel will be saved" (11:11-32)

1. God's purpose in Israel's rejection (11:11-15)
 2. The interrelationship of Jews and Gentiles: warning to Gentiles (11:16-24)
 3. The salvation of "all Israel" (11:25-32)
- F. Response: the wonderful plan of God (11:33-36)

V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1-15:13)

- A. The basic requirement: total transformation (12:1-2)
- B. Finding our place in the body of Christ (12:3-8)
- C. The many manifestations of love (12:9-21)
- D. Submitting to the governing authorities (13:1-7)
- E. Fulfilling the law through love (13:8-10)
- F. Living in light of the day (13:11-14)
- G. A plea for unity in the church (14:1-15:13)
 1. Condemning each other violates God's prerogative (14:1-12)
 2. Limiting the exercise of liberty through love (14:13-23)
 3. Put other people first! (15:1-6)
 4. Receive one another (15:7-13)

VI. The Letter Closing (15:14-16:27)

- A. Paul's ministry and travel plans (15:14-33)
- B. Greetings (16:1-16)
- C. Closing remarks and doxology (16:17-27)

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