

Preaching the Greatest Letter Ever Written

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Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most prized possessions and cherished treasures of the Christian church. In his commentary on Romans, F. F. Bruce quotes from William Tyndale's prologue to this Epistle written in 1534:

No man can verily read it too oft or study it too well: for the more it is studied the easier it is, the more it is chewed the pleasanter it is, and the more groundly it is searched the preciouser things are found in it, so great treasure of spiritual things lieth hid therein.¹

Five years later, in 1539, John Calvin wrote in the introduction to his commentary on Romans that: "If we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture."²

Furthermore, Romans is arguably the quintessential book within the whole Bible, when it comes to discovering the Christian gospel in its most clear, profound and soul-challenging expression.

Therefore it is not surprising that the corridors of Christian church history are strewn with exultant and powerful testimonies to the glorious

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Leicester: IVP, 1963).

² John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 5.

message of the sovereign, saving grace that this Epistle so magnifies.³ Saint Augustine was converted to the Christian faith through reading a passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans.⁴ Augustine tells us that upon reading Romans 13:13-14:

I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.⁵

Martin Luther's own discovery of the gospel in 1518 also centres on a passage of Romans (Romans 1:16-17):

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

After reading these verses as a young monk with a burdened conscience, Luther would later testify:

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.⁶

³ Wording from Barry Horner, *The Epistle to the Romans: An Outlined Commentary* (unpublished notes, 2015) 5.

⁴ Augustine, *Saint Augustine Confessions* (trans. Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152 (VIII, 12). Augustine writes: "I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes. . . . In my misery I kept crying, "How long shall I go on saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow'? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?" ...All at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain "Take it and read, take it and read." At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall" (152-52 [VIII, 12]).

⁵ Augustine, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, 153 (VIII, 12).

⁶ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," *Luther's Works*, 34:336-37. The fuller context of these quotation is: "At last, by the mercy of God, meditating

Some 200 years later (May 24, 1738), John Wesley tells us of a Moravian meeting he attended in Aldersgate Street, London. Someone was reading Luther's *Preface to the Romans*. Wesley wrote in his journal:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt it I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁷

And we could go on citing examples of people great and small who have been influenced by Paul's Letter to the Romans.⁸ It is not difficult to understand why this letter has been so influential in the life of the church over the centuries. For as Guy Waters points out, "[i]t is the fullest summary and most comprehensive exposition of Paul's gospel that we have."⁹ In his "Preface to the Epistle of the Romans" Martin Luther notes:

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. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.¹⁰

day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

⁷ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.* (8 vols.; London: Culley, 1909), 1:475-76.

⁸ See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 20-24.

⁹ Guy Waters, "Romans.," in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (ed. Kruger; Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 170.

¹⁰ Timothy F. Lull, William R. Russell, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis:

In order to appreciate and better grasp the message of Paul's Letter to the Romans, we first need to understand something of the background of the letter:

- (1) Where and when did Paul write it?
- (2) To whom did he write it?
- (3) Why did he write it?

Where and When Did Paul Write Romans?

Sometime late in the fall of AD 57 or 58, Paul travelled south from Troas to Corinth for his third and final visit to the believers there (2 Cor 2:12-13). In keeping with his original travel plans of 1 Corinthians 16:6, Paul spent the three winter months there (see Acts 20:2-3a and Rom 16:23). It was during his stay that, among other things, Paul wrote the *magnum opus* of his apostolic career, *The Letter to the Romans*. We may therefore reliably date the letter to the winter of AD 57-58.¹¹ Near the end of that great epistle (Rom 15:22-29), Paul lays out some new travel plans that include three localities:

- (1) Jerusalem (vv 25-27),
- (2) Rome (vv 22-24a, 28c-29), and
- (3) Spain (vv 24, 28b).

(1) Paul's immediate destination is Jerusalem (vv 25-27). As his prayer in Romans 15:30-33 reveals, Paul looks on this trip to Jerusalem with some trepidation. He has just completed a collection of money from the Gentile churches he has planted and is now planning to bring it to the impoverished churches of Judea (15:25-27; cf. 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9). Paul is hoping that the offering will be well-received by the Jewish

Fortress Press, 2012), 76.

¹¹ See Bruce W. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 49-50. See also Martin Williams, "When Pastor-Church Relationships Get Complicated: Paul and The Corinthians," *Vox Reformata*, 80 (2015): 21.

Christians and that this will go a long way to healing strained relations between them and the Gentile Christians. Because Paul is unsure how this offering will be received in Jerusalem, he asks the Christians in Rome (vv 30-31):

to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf...
that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so
that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed
in your company.¹²

(2) The second stop Paul plans to make is in Rome itself (vv 22-24a, 28c-29). Paul is now facing a major period of transition in his ministry (see Rom 15:19-23). He tells the Roman Christians “that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (v 19). He goes on to tell them (vv 23-24):

But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

(3) Paul's gaze has now turned to far-away Spain (vv 24, 28). Because the initial task of church planting in the eastern Mediterranean has now been completed, Paul's plan to go to Spain is based on his “ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation” (v 20). And so Rome will become an important stopping off point on his way to Spain (vv 24, 28).

¹² “As he writes to the Romans, the delicacy of this gesture is on his mind. Will the ethnic tensions, racial pride, and theological differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians surface again? Will Jewish believers in Jerusalem reject this gift and jeopardise the fragile unity of the church” (Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 324).

To Whom Did Paul Write Romans?

In Romans 1:7 Paul addresses his letter “to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.” This address immediately raises two questions:

- (1) What was the origin of the church at Rome?
- (2) What was the ethnic make-up of the church?

(1) What was the origin of the church at Rome?

Scholars estimate that by the first century BC the Jewish population in Rome may have been as large as 50,000 people.¹³ Many Jews arrived in Rome as slaves after the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC. In addition to this, strong commercial ties between Rome and Judea attracted many Jewish merchants who conducted trade in Rome. These Jews would have regularly gathered for the reading and discussing of Scripture, worship and prayer, celebrating Sabbaths and other holidays, and other mutual interests and causes as well as social life in general. The most likely scenario, then, is that some of these Jewish “visitors from Rome” (Acts 2:10), who were converted under the preaching of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, brought their new-found faith in Jesus as the Messiah back with them to their home synagogues and gatherings around AD 30/31.¹⁴ If Roman synagogues were anything like the other synagogues we read about in the book of Acts, then they were also populated with “God-fearers” and “proselytes,” that is, Gentile adherents to the Jewish faith (see, e.g., 13:16, 26, 43).¹⁵ Moreover, if the response to the proclamation of the gospel in the book of Acts is anything to go by, these Gentiles were likely some of the first adherents to the Christian

¹³ Burge, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 325.

¹⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 4; Michael F. Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 2016), 1. For the most detailed study of Christian origins in Rome see Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹⁵ Waters, “Romans,” in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 171.

faith.¹⁶ It is likely that the gospel would have continued to spread to Gentiles who had no connection to the synagogue or acquaintance with the Old Testament.¹⁷

(2) What was the ethnic make-up of the church?

Thus when we ask the question, What was the ethnic composition of the church? The answer appears to be: It was composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The motif “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16) which runs through Paul’s letter to the Romans “evidences the ethnic diversity of the Romans congregation.”¹⁸ On the one hand, there is much evidence to suggest that Paul has Jewish Christians in mind when he writes (2:1-3:8; 4:1-25; 6:14; 7:1, 4; 9:1-11:36; 16:3, 7, 11). On the other hand, there are also indications that Paul also has a Gentile audience in mind (1:5-6, 13; 11:13-24; 15:7-9, 14-21). Thus it is probable that Paul was writing to a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome.

If it is a mixed community, as the above evidence suggests, why then does Paul address it as primarily Gentile one? In Romans 1:5-6 he writes to them as one who has “received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all *the nations/Gentiles* [τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, *tois ethnesin*], including *you* [ὑμεῖς, *hymeis*, plural] who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” The answer is it seems that by the time Paul writes to them that Gentile Christians were in the majority. This fits historically with what we know of the Jewish community in Rome between Pentecost (AD30/31) and the writing of Romans (Acts 57/58). Around about AD 120 the Roman historian Suetonius (AD 75-160) compiled a series of biographies of the first twelve emperors, beginning with Julius Caesar. In the section titled “Lives of the Twelve Caesars,” in which he discusses the emperor Claudius, he states: “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Waters, “Romans,” in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 172.

¹⁷ Waters, “Romans,” in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 172.

¹⁸ Burge, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 324.

¹⁹ Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25.2 (“Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit”).

Most historians believe that Suetonius has both misspelled the name “Chrestus” and misunderstood the event. The man involved was not “Chrestus” (a common misspelling) but “Christus,” and the disturbance was not caused *by* “Christus” directly but was *over* “Jesus Christus.”²⁰ Apparently during the reign of Claudius, Christian and non-Christian Jews were involved in riots over the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Acts 13:49-51; 14:19-20).²¹ If this is how Suetonius’ account should be understood, it agrees with what Luke says in Acts 18:1-2:

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them.

According to Romans 16:3 it appears that many Jewish Christians such as Aquila and Priscilla had returned to Rome after Claudius’ death in AD 54 (“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus”). The six year interval between the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in around about AD 49 and their return in AD 54 meant that Christianity grew in Rome both with an increasing number of Gentile converts and under a growing Gentile leadership.²² However, in the three to four years between the death of Claudius (AD 54) and Paul’s Letter to the Romans (AD 57), the church at Rome would have witnessed “a considerable influx of Jewish Christians.”²³ And so it doesn’t take much imagination to see the tensions that this expulsion and subsequent return of Jewish Christians might have caused. As Bird points out: “If Romans 9-11 and 14-15 are illustrative of the Romans context, Paul wrote to the Roman Gentiles after the return of the Jewish Christian exiles to Rome when rifts were beginning to open up between different factions.”²⁴

²⁰ See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 12-13. For an alternative explanation see H. D. Slingerland, *Claudian Policymaking and the Early Imperial Repression of Judaism at Rome* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997),

²¹ See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 12.

²² Bird, *Romans*, 3.

²³ Waters, “Romans,” in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 172.

²⁴ Bird, *Romans*, 3.

Why Did Paul Write Romans?

The historical background painted here provides the backdrop for understanding Paul's purpose in writing to the Roman church and what he hoped to achieve in writing to them. Here we want to ask the question: Why did Paul write Romans? Before we try to answer that question we also want to ask another question: Why should we preach or teach Romans? Or to put the question another way: "What do we hope to achieve by preaching Romans?"²⁵ The answer ought to be: We hope to achieve in *preaching Romans* what Paul sought to achieve in *writing Romans*.²⁶ "That is," says Christopher Ash, "we trust that the reasons why Paul wrote Romans are the reasons why God wants us to preach Romans. That when God carried Paul along by His Spirit to write Romans (c.f., 2 Pet 1:21) the purpose in the mind of Paul was and is the purpose in the heart of God, and ought therefore to be the purpose in the mind and heart of the preacher today. So to ask, 'Why should we preach and teach Romans?' is to ask 'Why did Paul write Romans'?"²⁷

So why did Paul write Romans? What are the reasons for writing his letter to the Romans? I would like to suggest that Paul had at least two *main* purposes in mind when he wrote his Letter to the Romans (there may be others but I want to focus on the two that most scholars agree on): (1) The first purpose focuses on *Paul's own circumstances* while (2) the second focuses on *the circumstances of the Christian community in Rome*.

²⁵ Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans: Volume One: Unlocking Romans 1-8 for the Bible Teacher* (London: Proclamation Trust Media, 2009), 27.

²⁶ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 27.

²⁷ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 27.

Purpose #1: Partnership in the Gospel

Most scholars rightly observe that one of Paul's key purposes in writing to the Roman Christians is to prepare for his mission to Spain.²⁸ In Romans 15:14-33 Paul opens his heart to the Christians in Rome. After he has taken the collection to Jerusalem, he tells them that

I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while (15:24).

The verb translated “helped on my journey” (*προπέμπω, propempō*) means “to assist someone in making a journey, send on one's way with food, money, by arranging for companions, means of travel, etc.”²⁹ and is used elsewhere to refer to missionary support (Acts 15:3; 20:38; 21:5; 1 Cor 16:6; Tit 3:13).³⁰ “[H]e wants them to be a missionary-sending church and supporting church, including prayer and material and spiritual refreshment for his ministry (15:31,32).”³¹ In order for church in Rome to become a gospel-eager church that will partner with him in mission for the sake of the gospel, it is important that they have confidence in Paul, that they understand the gospel that he proclaims, and that they learn the same passion that he has for the gospel.³² In Romans 1:15 he tells them that he is “eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome,” because he wants them to have this same passion for the gospel to be

²⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 17; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 22; Bird, *Romans*, 10-11; Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 31.

²⁹ BDAG, 873 (2) (emphasis in the original). Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 15.72, similarly write: “to send someone on in the direction in which he has already been moving, with the probable implication of providing help—‘to send on one's way, to help on one's way.’” See also LSJ, 1494; *NIDNTTE*, 3:704.

³⁰ See *EDNT*, 3:160; Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 442; John D. Harvey, *Romans* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 364-65; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 872.

³¹ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 31.

³² Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 31. Schreiner writes, “He knew that such support would not be forthcoming unless they had a firm grasp of the Pauline gospel. Thus he articulated the gospel in some detail in the letter so that the Romans would comprehend the basics of the gospel and so that they could reply to critics who distorted what Paul taught” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 774).

preached to others.

In other words, if we want people to get enthused about missions, if we want them to develop a deep concern for the lost in their city, if we want them to have a heart for the unbelievers in their neighborhood, we need to follow Paul's example by first helping them to cultivate a passion for the gospel. And so as we read Romans and as we prepare to preach or teach Romans, we need to ask ourselves: "How will this exposition of the gospel promote a church who will be eager and passionate to see the gospel proclaimed to all?"³³ I suggest that the best way to do that is to faithfully and passionately and systematically preach through Paul's Letter to the Romans—this is the means that God ordained and therefore this is the means that God will bless. For as we will see in a moment, if we were to single out one theme as being central to the book of Romans, it would have to be "the gospel."

In saying that, it also needs to be emphasised, that Paul's exposition of the gospel in Romans is not simply the product of an ivory tower theologian sitting down in a quiet library somewhere in the Mediterranean preparing to publish his "Treatise on the Gospel," or "Compendium of Christian Doctrine" (as Philip Melanchthon once called Romans),³⁴ or "Dogmatics in Outline" (as in J. Christiaan Beker's criticism of Barth's commentary on Romans).³⁵ Rather, Paul's exposition of the gospel arises out of a heart that is inflamed with a passion for the glory of God and that is broken with a grief over the lostness of his people. We see the first at the end of Romans

³³ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 31.

³⁴ Philip Melanchthon, *Loci communes 1521*, in *Melanchthons Werke*, ed. Hans Engelland, 7 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1951-75), 2.7.25; English ed., *The Loci Communes of Phillip Melanchthon*, trans. Charles L. Hill (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1944), 69. Donfried observes that "[u]p to the time of F. C. Baur, virtually all scholars would have agreed with Melanchthon's evaluation of Romans as a *Christianae religionis compendium*" (Karl P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), xli.).

³⁵ See J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 62. Beker criticises Karl Barth both for paying no attention in his commentary to Romans 1:1-15 and 15:14-16:25 and for ignoring the historical issues (see p. 65). Beker writes: "The presupposition that Romans is a 'theological confession' or a 'dogmatics in outline' is the real reason for the immense interest in the letter's architectonic structure and the neglect of its 'frame'" (p. 62; see also pp. 68-69).

11; as Paul brings the main body of his exposition of the gospel to a close his heart soars heavenward as he exclaims (11:33-36):

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

But as he contemplates the lostness and lifelessness of his people his heart is burdened and broken (9:2-3):

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

And so he writes in Romans 10:1:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

In the study of Romans, even with the employment of the Greek text, serious commentaries, and sharp mental focus, we are never to forget that Paul’s purpose in writing this epistle was a deep concern for the souls of his audience, their relationship with Christ, the glory of God, and not academic infatuation. So I suggest that if we want God’s people to have a passion for the gospel, a passion for the lost, and a passion for the glory of God then we need to preach Romans. We need to preach it expositionally and experientially, practically and passionately, systematically and pragmatically. We need to preach it *from* the heart as well as the head, *to* the heart as well as to the head. So that is the first thing we see here: Paul’s purpose in writing Romans is both theological and doxological, practical and missiological.

Purpose #2: Pastoral Care in the Gospel

A second implied purpose for writing his letter to the Romans was to address a pastoral problem that had arisen in the Roman church. Throughout the letter, but especially in the latter part, we see indications that Paul is very concerned about the relational harmony between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church. The expulsion of Jewish Christians under Emperor Claudius (see above) would have had huge implications for the membership, structure, and leadership of the Roman church. Likewise, the influx of the Jewish Christians after Claudius's death would have resulted in complicated and messy relations between the now largely Gentile church and the returning Jewish exiles.³⁶ Thus it is not surprising to discover that Paul's concern for unity between Jews and Gentiles runs right throughout the letter.³⁷

(1) With unity as the aim, Paul *wisely expounds* the interlocking nature of the Jewish and Gentile missions (1:16; 10:14-21; 11:13-33; 15:8-9, 27), *winsomely emphasizes* the fact that both Jew and Gentile equally stand as unrighteous before a righteous God (1:18-3:20), and *warmly exposits* God's faithfulness to Israel and his impartiality towards both Jews and Gentiles by justifying them both on the basis of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (3:21-8:39).³⁸

(2) Then in chapters 9 through 11 Paul emphasizes God's faithfulness to both Israel and to the Gentiles. Schreiner suggests that, "Paul writes this section to stave off Gentile pride by providing the larger theological backdrop to what was happening in Rome. It would be easy for Gentiles in Rome to conclude that the influx of Gentiles into the church and the minimal response from the Jews indicated the moral superiority of the former. Paul explains in this section why such a perspective badly misses the mark."³⁹

³⁶ Bird, *Romans*, 11.

³⁷ See Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 32.

³⁸ Some of this language has been taken from Bird, *Romans*, 11.

³⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 471.

(3) Then in the very next chapter, chapter 12, Paul stresses the need for the whole body, with its diversity of gifts, to work together in *harmony* (12:3-8, 10, 16) and *humility* (12:3) for the overall good of the body (12:5).

(4) Then finally, the pastoral problem surfaces most explicitly in chapters 14 and 15 which reflect a disagreement among two groups in the church which Paul labels as the “strong” and the “weak” (e.g., 15:1). Scholars suggest that the weak were probably Jewish Christians who believed that they were still “bound by certain ‘ritual’ requirements of the Mosaic law.”⁴⁰ Paul’s counsel in Rom 14:1 suggests that this group was in the minority: “As for the one who is weak in faith, *welcome him*, but not to quarrel over opinions.”⁴¹ And, as Moo observes, “typical of such scrupulous minorities, these weak Christians were ‘condemning’ those other Christians who did not follow their rules.”⁴² And so Paul’s exhortation to the church in chapters 14 and 15 begins (14:1) and concludes (15:7) with a call to acceptance and unity based on Christ’s own example (15:7): “Therefore *welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*, for the glory of God.”

The Christological shape of Paul’s argument here (and right through this section) is an example of how Paul applies the gospel he has expounded in Romans 1-13 to the present situation in the Roman church. Paul wants them to live in harmony with one another and this harmony is grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ (15:5): “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, *in accord with Christ Jesus*.” Left to itself, the church in Rome would not naturally be a place of unity and harmony. Only the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone could make it so. So Paul expounds the gospel in Romans as the only right means of establishing unity and harmony, reconciliation and peace in the church. It is only on the basis of the gospel and in Jesus Christ that Jew and Gentile can truly become one people. Thus, as we read Romans and as we prepare to preach and teach Romans we need to ask ourselves: “How will this exposition of the gospel promote a church that will live together and serve together in

⁴⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 831.

⁴¹ See Moo, *Romans*, 831.

⁴² Moo, *Romans*, 831.

love and unity and harmony?”⁴³

Purposes 1 and 2: Unity and Mission

As preachers and teachers, pastors and church leaders we are confronted here with two challenges with respect to the local church—one is internal and the other is external: The *internal* challenge is this: How can I lead my church or my leadership team or my eldership towards a deeper experience of unity and harmony, love and peace? What can I do bring that about? The *external* challenge is this: How can I turn an inward looking church that seems only focused on itself and its own concerns and problems into an outward looking church, not simply for the sake of church growth, but for the purpose of crossing cultural barriers and ethnic barriers and socio-economic barriers with the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can I do that?

These are probably two of the key issues that keep pastors awake at night and gnaw at them through the day: (1) How can we become more loving as a church toward one another and toward the world around us? (2) How can we promote a new sense of unity inwardly that will also lead to a new sense of unity in mission outwardly? How do we do that? The answer is simply this: Only a church deeply soaked in the gospel will live in harmony. Only a church radically shaped by the gospel will live in unity. Only a church systematically taught the gospel will reach out to those around them with zeal and boldness. Only a church that passionately emphasises the gospel will be passionate about gospel ministry. Only the gospel enables very different people to live together in harmony and happiness. And only the gospel empowers us to reach across all sorts of barriers to different and difficult people.

The logic of the gospel as Paul expounds it in his Letter to the Romans should both propel us outward in mission and build us upward together in love and unity. As Christopher Ash says:

⁴³ From Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 33.

Paul's great aim in Romans is that God should be glorified, and in particular that the glory of His grace should be visible in the supernatural phenomenon of a united and missionary church. We may therefore take as a working hypothesis the following overall purpose statement for Romans: The purpose of Romans is the glory of God seen in a united missionary church humbled together under grace.⁴⁴

The Theme of Romans: The Gospel

Paul's gospel goal in writing Romans leads into its gospel content which, as we have seen, supports that goal. In Romans 1:16-17 Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Commentators are generally agreed that here we have the thematic statement for the entire letter. As James Boice says:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth verses of Romans 1, we come to sentences that are the most important in the letter and perhaps in all literature. They are the theme of this epistle and the essence of Christianity. They are the heart of biblical religion.⁴⁵

Paul's introductory and personal remarks in vv 1-15 have provided a deliberate build up to this statement of purpose. Note the references to: the *gospel* in vv 1, 9, 15 and to *faith* in vv 5, 8, 12.

⁴⁴ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 36-37.

⁴⁵ James M. Boice, *Romans: Volume One: Justification by faith (Romans 1-4)* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 103.

The Gospel (1:1, 9, 15)	Faith (1:5, 8, 12)
<p>1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for <i>the gospel</i> of God.</p>	<p>1:5 Through whom [Jesus Christ, v4] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of <i>faith</i> for the sake of his name among all the nations.</p>
<p>1:9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in <i>the gospel</i> of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you.</p>	<p>1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your <i>faith</i> is proclaimed in all the world.</p>
<p>1:15 So I am eager to preach <i>the gospel</i> to you also who are in Rome.</p>	<p>1:12 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— [v 12] that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's <i>faith</i>, both yours and mine.</p>

At the same time it is this “**gospel**” which provides the theme for the entire Epistle and not just its opening verses. As Carson and Moo note:

If we are to single out one theme, a good case can be made for “the gospel.” This word and its cognate verb “to evangelize” are prominent in the introduction and in the conclusion of Romans, that is, in its epistolary frame, where we might expect to encounter any overarching topic. It is the word “gospel” that has pride of place in 1:16-17, which is so often (and probably rightly) taken to be the statement of the letter’s theme. Moreover...Romans grows out of Paul’s missionary situation, which makes natural a focus on that gospel with which Paul had been entrusted by his Lord. Romans, then, is Paul’s statement of his gospel.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 409.

A consideration of the terms “**gospel**” (*euangelion*) and “**preach the gospel**” (*euangelizō*) bear out the significance of this observation. As Romans follows a distinct epistolary structure, a rather clear pattern begins to emerge:

Romans		“gospel” (<i>euangelion</i>)	“preach the gospel” (<i>euangelizō</i>)
1.	1:1-17 Introduction	1:1,9,16	1:15
2.	1:18-15:13 Main Body	2:16; 10:16; 11:28	10:15
3.	15:14-16:27 Conclusion	15:16,19; 16:25	15:20

Although we should not hang too much on sheer statistics it is probably significant that two-thirds of the occurrences of these words (8 out of 12) are found in the “epistolary frame” of the Epistle.

Then within vv 16-17 themselves Paul is following a very clear train of thought. Each statement he makes is linked to the preceding one by the conjunction “**for**” or “**because**” (I include vv 15 and 18 as well for context):

(1) First he tells us why he is ready to preach the gospel at Rome (v 15)—

“**because** I not ashamed of the gospel” (v 16a).

(2) Then he tells us why he is not ashamed of the gospel (v 16a)—

“**because** it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (v 16b).

(3) Then he tells us why it is the power of God for salvation (16b)—

“**because** in it righteousness of God is revealed,” that is God’s way of justifying sinners, he gives his righteousness to us.

(4) Then he tells us how that gift of righteousness is received—

“from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous by faith shall live’” (v 16c). That is to say, it is *by faith alone*.

(5) Finally, he tells us why this is necessary (v 18):

“*because* the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

It is this kind of logic that sets the tone for the discussion that follows.

To quote James Dunn:

These two verses (vv 16-17) serve as the launching pad and provide the primary thrust and direction for the rest of the letter, with the double explanation concerning the gospel (“for...for...”) giving both the *raison d'être* [the most important reason] for Paul’s missionary endeavour and the outline for the main argument to be developed through chaps. 1-15.⁴⁷

For Paul this is the heart and essence of the gospel: God’s action in Jesus Christ to justify guilty sinners by counting them righteous by faith alone in Christ alone. Paul begins his description of the gospel in Romans 1:1-4 with these words:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart *for the gospel of God*, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, *concerning his Son*, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

⁴⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word Books 1988), 46.

Calvin explains:

In this important passage Paul teaches us that the whole Gospel, is contained in Christ. To move even a step from Christ means to withdraw oneself from the Gospel. Since Christ is the king and express image of the Father, it need not surprise us that He alone is set in front of us as the One who is both the object and centre of our whole faith. The words, therefore, constitute a description of the Gospel, by which Paul summarises its content.⁴⁸

Even more specifically, as verse 4 indicates, it centres on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The gospel of God ... concerning his Son, who was ... declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.

And the message of the gospel is that God graciously brings people into a right relationship with himself by considering them as righteous in his sight (Rom 4:5) on the basis of Christ's obedient life, sacrificial death and vindicating resurrection. Moreover, as Moo points out, this message is nothing other than what we call justification by faith alone.⁴⁹ And therefore justification by faith alone is also central to Paul's theology

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Romans*, 15. See also Robert Haldane, *Romans*, 27: "It is of Him [Jesus Christ] that the Gospel of God, promised by the prophets, treats; so that He is not simply a legislator or interpreter of the Divine will, like Moses, and the Prophets, and the Apostles. ... But it is altogether different respecting Jesus Christ, who is exclusively the Alpha and Omega of the Gospel, its proper object, its beginning and its end."

⁴⁹ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 29. Moo writes: "But while it is not the theme of Romans, justification by faith is nevertheless of critical importance to the letter. For, as we will argue below, the theme of the letter is the gospel. And the message of the gospel is that God brings guilty sinners into relationship with himself and destines them to eternal life when they believe in his Son, Jesus the Messiah. Moreover, this message is nothing more than what we call justification by faith. And justification by faith is central to Romans and to Paul's theology, also because it expresses, in the sphere of anthropology, a crucial element in Paul's understanding of God's work in Christ: it's entirely gracious character. Justification by faith is the necessary implicate of the grace of God (e.g., 4:5, 16)."

because it is also central to the gospel he proclaims. Paul's emphasis again and again throughout Romans is that our right standing before God is on the basis of faith alone by grace alone through Christ alone to the glory of God alone! James Montgomery Boice devotes a whole chapter of his commentary to Romans 1:17 under the heading of, "Martin Luther's Text." Boice concludes his sermon with these marvelous words:

Later in life Luther was to write many things about the doctrine of justification by faith, which he had learned from Romans 1:17. He would call it "the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed." He called it "the master and prince, the lord, the ruler and the judge over all kinds of doctrines." He said, "If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time." He argued, "It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God, and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour." What a heritage! What a rebuke against the weak state of present-day Christianity! If justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, our contemporary declines are no doubt due to our failure to understand, appreciate, and live by this doctrine. The church of our day does not stand tall before the world. It bows to it. Christians are not fearless before ridicule. We flee from it. Is the reason not that we have never truly learned to stand before God in his righteousness?

How Many Sermons Should I Preach on Romans?

The above quotation came from Boice's 13th sermon on Romans. Boice would go on to preach 239 sermons on Paul's Letter to the Romans. How about us? Is that a good idea? Maybe 239 is not enough. Maybe we should aim for 366 sermons as Martyn Lloyd-Jones did? Or we could aim for a few less, perhaps 225 sermons (as John Piper did)? You could even halve that with 124 sermons (John MacArthur). But I think you may be even better off preaching an initial series of around 30-50 sermons as Kent

Hughes did.⁵⁰ Even then I would be inclined to break my series into four blocks of about 10-12 sermons following the suggested “gospel” structure of Romans provided by Don Carson and Doug Moo:

1:18-4:25 The Gospel as the Righteousness of God by Faith

5:1-8:39 The Gospel as the Power of God for Salvation

9:1-11:36 The Gospel and Israel

12:1-15:13 The Gospel and the Transformation of Life

Christopher Ash suggests the same structure but focuses it around the theme of “grace”:

Block A (chapters 1-4): Introduction + first section of letter
‘Coming under grace’

Block B (chapters 5-8): Second section of letter
‘Living under grace’

Block C (chapters 9-11): Third section of letter
‘The overflow of grace’

Block D (chapters 12-16): Fourth section of letter
‘A church shaped by grace’
+ conclusion⁵¹

Then, at a later date, if you feel that you did not do enough justice to some passages you could do some mini-series such as what Philip Ryken did when he preached a series of seventeen sermons on Romans 8.⁵² The problem with the much longer series is that by the time you get to the end of the series, your congregation, if any of them are still alive at

⁵⁰ See R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

⁵¹ Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 40.

⁵² See: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?seriesOnly=true&currSection=sermonstopic&sourceid=tenth&keyword=Series+on+Romans+8&keyworddesc=Series+on+Romans+8> (accessed 10/01/2018).

that point, will have completely forgotten how the message of Romans as a whole coheres. It must be remembered that Paul originally wrote Romans with the intention that it be read aloud from start to finish *in one sitting*. Therefore the message of Romans is best comprehended when we understand not only the meaning each part, but also how each part contributes to the message of the whole and how the message of the whole contributes to our understanding of each part.⁵³ And so I submit that a shorter series will best facilitate this. Other ways in which pastors and elders might help their congregations grasp the message of Romans might also be through bible studies, one-on-one or group reading of the letter as a whole, Christian education classes, and recommended readings that explain the letter simply and succinctly.

Preaching Romans to the Whole Person (Romans 1)

I want to conclude with one final exhortation and it is this: Preach Romans to the whole person. One of the temptations when preaching through Romans is to almost by default turn it into a series of *Lectures on Theology*. After all, as Douglas Moo points out, the most “striking feature of the letter is the general and sustained argument of 1:16-11:26,” which, “[u]nlike, for instance, 1 Corinthians, where Paul’s agenda is set by questions and issues raised by the readers, these chapters in Romans develop according to the inner logic of Paul’s own teaching.”⁵⁴ It is for this reason that Martin Luther’s colleague Philip Melancthon once called Romans a “Compendium of Christian Doctrine.”⁵⁵

⁵³ See Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 40. Ash writes: “In general, longer passages help to show the flow and logic of the letter well, but are hard to teach with faithful attention to detail. If we teach the detail accurately, we may find we have very little time left for practical application. Shorter passages give us less explaining to do, so we can devote more time to application; but the danger is that we lose the big context and sweep of the letter.”

⁵⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 14.

⁵⁵ Philip Melancthon, *Loci communes 1521*, in *Melancthon's Werke*, ed. Hans Engelland, 7 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1951-75), 2.7.25; English ed., *The Loci Communes of Phillip Melancthon*, trans. Charles L. Hill (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1944), 69. Donfried observes that “[u]p to the time of F. C. Baur, virtually all scholars would have agreed with Melancthon’s evaluation of Romans as a *Christianae religionis compendium*” (Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate*, xli.).

However, as we have sought to demonstrate, Romans is not a timeless treatise (though it does contain timeless truth), but rather a letter that is occasioned by Paul's own missionary situation, on the one hand, and the circumstances of the Roman Church, on the other. Thus Romans is practical and experiential, missiological and doxological, as well as being theological and doctrinal. And it is these features of Romans that should shape our preaching of it. Furthermore, as we have seen, the great theme of Romans is the gospel, and the great work of the gospel is not just to save but also sanctify, not just redeem but also renew. Through the work of Christ we are not just given a new status (Romans 1-5) but also a new heart (Romans 6-8). Therefore it is important that the preacher aim for the heart as a whole and not just the mind or even the will. For as Murray Capill points out:

Christianity is a heart religion. The gospel calls for the response of our whole being to the living God who has saved us from our sinful rebellion. Heart Christianity embraces what we think, feel, do, and desire. It is focused not on outward ritual but on inner reality, which produces fruit in our lives.⁵⁶

In his book *The Heart is the Target*, Capill points out that “[t]he most helpful tool for the preacher aiming at the heart is to consider the various faculties of the heart.”⁵⁷ Now I don't have the space to open this up and so I would really encourage you to read Capill's book. In short, when we approach Romans we need to learn to ask not only “**mind**” questions of the text (that is “what are the central truths of the text that people must know and believe”—the sort of questions we normally ask Romans)⁵⁸ but also “**conscience**” questions (“questions of the text that will help us develop the convicting, testing, warning purposes of God's Word”),⁵⁹ “**will**” questions (questions that “identify any key actions and responses

⁵⁶ Murray Capill, *The Heart is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 112.

⁵⁷ Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 103.

⁵⁸ Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 115.

⁵⁹ Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 115.

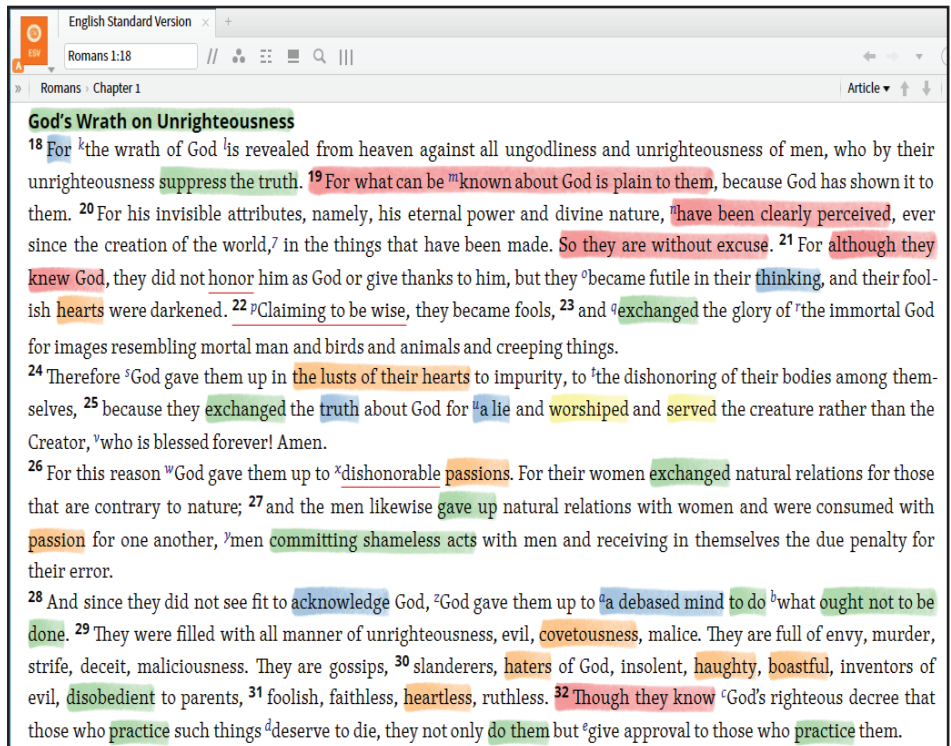
the text calls for”),⁶⁰ and finally **questions that target the “affections” or “passions”** (questions that probe both the passions of the writer and the deep desires of the heart that should be stirred by biblical truth).⁶¹ Notice, for example, how all four appear with great frequency in even a short passage like Romans 1:18-32:

- **Heart:** 1:21 (“their foolish hearts were darkened”); 1:24 (“the lusts of their hearts”); 1:31 (“heartless”).
- **Mind:** 1:18 (“the truth”); 1:19 (“known about God”); 1:20 (“clearly perceived”); 1:21 (“knew God”); 1:21 (“futile in their thinking”); 1:22 (“claiming to be wise”); 1:25 (“the truth of God...a lie”); 1:28 (“acknowledge God”); 1:28 (“a debased mind”); 1:32 (“they know God’s righteous decree”).
- **Conscience:** 1:18 (“by their unrighteousness they suppress the truth”); 1:19 (“what can be known about God is plain to them”); 1:20 (“have been clearly perceived”); 1:20 (“they are without excuse”); 1:21 (“although they knew God”) 1:32 (“though they know God’s righteous decree”).
- **Will:** 1:18 (“they suppress the truth”); 1:21 (“they did not honour him or give him thanks”); 1:23 (“they...exchanged”); 1:25 (“they exchanged ...worshipped and served”); 1:26 (“exchanged natural relations”) 1:17 (“gave up natural relations...committing shameless acts”); 1:30 (“disobedient to parents”); 1:32 (“practice such things... do them...practice them”).
- **Affections/Passions:** 1:24 (“the lusts of their hearts); 1:25 (“worshipped”); 1:26 (“dishonourable passions”); 1:27 (“consumed with passion”); 1:29 (“filled with... covetousness...haters of God... haughty...boastful”).

⁶⁰ Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 115.

⁶¹ Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 116.

In my (Logos) Bible I coloured the different faculties of the heart in this way in order provided the above listing: blue = mind; red = conscience; green = will; orange = passions (though the colours cannot be shown below):



If you were to take a highlighter to one of your sermons and were to highlight each of the different faculties that you were targeting in your sermon with different colours, would it be as varied and colourful as Romans 1:18-32? Or would it mostly be in one colour, perhaps blue the colour of the mind? Now of course the ratio of colours would vary from text to text and sermon to sermon, but there would be cause for concern if all our sermons consistently targeted only one faculty such as the mind (truths we need to know and believe) or the will (actions we need to perform) and not also the conscience (convictions we need to possess) and the passions (affections we need to cultivate). So I would really like to encourage you to keep all of the faculties of the heart in view as you

seek to address your hearers. As Capill points out, “a holistic approach to application is concerned with bringing the message as a whole, to the person as a whole, for life as a whole.”⁶² To which we add, to the glory of God as a whole!

⁶² Capill, *Heart is the Target*, 25.