

Covenant College

THE PURPOSE AND CONTEMPORARY
RELEVANCE OF PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Senior Integration Paper

by

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November 2001

*Notice: The views expressed in this Senior Integration Paper do not necessarily represent the views of
Covenant College.

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INTRODUCTION

Many evangelicals operate with the understanding that Romans has ceased to be relevant to contemporary issues. Some feel this epistle deals with dead issues and ancient controversies. Many contemporary readers see the structure of Romans dealing with Jew and Gentile relations, an issue that does not have nearly the significance to the contemporary reader as it did for the original Roman recipients of the epistle. To further the distaste some have had in reading Romans, many Christians feel that the epistle to the Romans is “heavy reading” that takes too much time and effort.¹ Within liberal circles of Christianity, Paul has been seen as suspect to “perverting the gospel” and giving Christianity “too much religion.”²

In the face of all these misconceptions about the epistle to the Romans, one who takes time to give considered treatment to the purpose and contemporary relevance of Paul’s epistle to the Romans will come to realize that this masterpiece not only plumbs the depths of biblical doctrine, but also provides remarkable insights into how these doctrines affect the daily lives of contemporary readers. The epistle to the Romans was,

¹A.M. Hunter, *Epistle to the Romans* (London SCM Press LTD, 1955; reprint, London: Northumberland Press Limited, 1961), 17.

is, and continues to be pertinent and relevant to those who carefully consider the text. With good reason, many of the greatest leaders of the Christian faith, such as St. Augustine; Martin Luther; and John Wesley, found their lives radically transformed after an encounter with Romans. In fact, it was Martin Luther's reading of Romans that precipitated the Protestant Reformation.³ Through this single epistle, God has already transformed the lives of thousands; there is every reason to believe that God continues to use this precious book to change lives of those who read it today.⁴

In order to fully understand the epistle to the Romans, it is helpful to first understand the purpose Paul had in mind when he wrote the epistle. If one does not understand the context of the situation in which the epistle was written, it becomes very difficult to understand the message Paul intended for the reader to glean from this great writing. Was Romans written as a summation of Christian doctrine? Was it written to deal with localized issues in the Roman church? Or, was it written in preparation for Paul's visit to Rome? The response one gives to each of these questions has heavy bearing upon the understanding he may take from the book of Romans. Marxsen summed up the importance of considering the purpose of Romans well when he said, "If we answer [the question of the purpose of the epistle to the Romans] wrongly, we shall be led inevitably into a misunderstanding of the whole document."⁵

After a consideration of the purpose of Romans, the direction of this paper will shift to a contemplation of the various issues Paul addresses and how they are relevant to

² Ibid., 18.

³ Leon Morris, *Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 1.

⁴ Hunter, 21.

⁵ W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 92.

the life of the modern-day Christian. In order to understand this subject as fully as possible, this paper will address the continuing relevance of the doctrines Paul promotes in the epistle, a consideration of the ethical implications the epistle has for the Christian, and a consideration of how the book should influence every day life.

I. THE OCCASION OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Two Classifications for the Views on the Purpose of Romans

There are two rudimentary classifications for the views expressed by contemporary theologians on this subject of the occasion of Romans. The first classification is of those who believe that Paul wrote the book of Romans to deal with localized issues in the church at Rome.⁶ Generally speaking, most commentators who hold to this view believe that Romans was written to deal with conflict among Jews and Gentiles. The second classification includes those who hold to the theory that Paul found occasion to write Romans for reasons outside of ecumenical difficulties in the Roman church.⁷

While, in this second view, there is not common agreement as to what this “other purpose” might have been, most who take this view believe that the motivation behind the writing of Romans was to be found in Paul’s need—not in the need of the Roman church. Some theologians believe Paul’s purpose was to seek support for his missionary

⁶ Karl P. Donfried, “False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans” (*FPSR*), in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 102.

journeys. For others, Paul's letter is preparation for his visit to Rome. Still others combine these two purposes to say that Paul wrote to prepare for a visit as well as to seek support for his upcoming missionary work.

It seems, however, that to place this discussion within the context of an "either, or" pattern is insufficient. It is much more plausible that Paul had in mind some combination of these two classifications of purpose when he wrote the epistle to the Romans. The evidence suggests that while Paul wrote Romans to prepare for a visit to Rome, he also took advantage of the opportunity to address the tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church.

The Former Consensus and the Recent Debate

Discussion about the occasion of Romans has surfaced largely in contemporary times. Prior to the twentieth century, the vast majority of Christian commentators and theologians were in general agreement that Paul wrote Romans for the purpose of providing a detailed, thoughtful summation of essential Christian doctrine. As recently as 1944, reputable evangelical commentators contended that Romans was written as a summation of the essential Christian doctrines.⁸

With the arrival of twentieth-century emphasis upon the historical-critical methodology in biblical scholarship, however, many theologians began to question what objective Paul might have had in mind when he wrote Romans. This shift in biblical scholarship is best understood when one compares the former general consensus that Romans was written as a summation of Christian doctrine with a recent statement by Klein: "...this document has thus far revealed less of the secret of its occasion than has

⁷ See, for instance, Bornkamm, Fuchs, Jervell, Manson, and Jewett, and Morris

any other authentic letter of Paul.”⁹ Another contemporary author notes, “It is more difficult to come up with a precise definition of the purpose of Romans than would appear at first sight.”¹⁰ It is clear that a paradigm shift has taken place in biblical scholarship with the arrival of the historical-critical methodology. It is further clear that this shift has caused many scholars to rethink the purpose of the Roman epistle.¹¹

Before considering the contemporary difficulty with the purpose of Romans, it will serve this discussion well to more fully understand why the former consensus—that Romans was written as a summation of Christian doctrine—is no longer viewed as plausible. It is true that Romans deals with some of the leading doctrines of the Christian faith, including justification by faith, election, the universality of sin, and the grace of God. However, it is important to also observe that the epistle is not comprehensive in its exposition of the essentials of the Christian faith. It fails to include a discussion of the Resurrection, Christology, Eschatology, or Communion.¹² Furthermore, this traditional understanding of the occasion of Romans fails to explain why the letter was written specifically for Rome.¹³

Since Romans is primarily a discussion of “grand themes” of the faith,¹⁴ it is easy to understand why theologians prior to the twentieth century might have concluded,¹⁵ as Melancton first suggested, that Romans was written to be a “compendium of Christian

⁸ Karl P. Donfried, “Introduction” (*INTRO*), in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), xli.

⁹ Günter Klein, “Paul’s Purpose in Writing the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 291.

¹⁰ Peter Stuhlmacher, “The Purpose of Romans,” in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 232.

¹¹ Klein, 291.

¹² Feine B. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 221.

¹³ Morris, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

doctrine” (the “doctrinae Christianae compenium”).¹⁶ In light of recent biblical study, however, it seems that this explanation for the occasion of Romans is insufficient. Thus, the quest has begun to reconsider the traditional understand of the purpose of the Roman epistle.

T.W. Manson’s Theory: A Letter to the Ephesians and the Romans

T.W. Manson was among the first to offer an alternative to the traditional understanding of Romans. He notes that, in most copies of Romans, both Romans 1:1-7 and Romans 1:8-17 make explicit mention of Rome. However, these references to Rome are omitted in several early texts. The text is altered from, “all who are at Rome, beloved of God,” to “all who are in the love of God.”¹⁷ This omission is made in at least two different texts in two different places and, therefore, it is evident that it was not an unintentional mistake, but a deliberate action.¹⁸

Manson brings to the discussion a second difficulty in the text of Romans. There is some question as to the length of the original letter. Manson notes that, in several different copies of the epistle, a doxology is placed at varying points within chapters fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. Therefore, he concludes, the letter must have existed in three forms. One version included fourteen chapters; another version included fifteen chapters; and yet another version included sixteen chapters.¹⁹ Chapter sixteen, Manson argues, presents special difficulty. Many of the names Paul uses in his greetings in Romans 16 are known to be Asian and Ephesian in origin. Further, chapter sixteen seems

¹⁶ Kümmel, 221.

¹⁷ T.W. Manson, “St Paul’s Letter to the Romans—and Others,” in *Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 5.

¹⁸ John A. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 2.

¹⁹ Manson, 13-14.

to reflect some familiarity with the recipients of the letter.²⁰ While this would not be a problem if Paul were addressing the epistle to a church with which he was familiar, in chapters one and fifteen, he has already admitted that he had not yet visited Rome. How, then, might it be possible that Paul could be so familiar with the church members as to give warm and personal greetings to them each by name?

Manson attempts to answer these difficulties by understanding Romans as Paul's judgment on the issues previously considered in his letters to the Corinthians. In turn, Manson feels that the letter was first delivered to the Roman church in the form of the first fifteen chapters. After this version was delivered to the Romans, Manson speculates that chapter sixteen was added as a greeting to the church at Ephesus and, in turn, Paul sent a copy of the epistle to Ephesus. The third letter, consisting of only fourteen chapters and having "in Rome" removed, was likely the letter altered by Marcion. Manson feels that, since Paul was probably in Corinth when he wrote the epistle to the Romans, his thoughts were delivered to the Corinthians by word of mouth. Thus, Manson concludes that Romans is a consideration of Paul's deepest convictions, sent to the Ephesians, the Romans, and verbally delivered to the Corinthians.²¹

A Critique of Manson

If Manson's speculation were to be found accurate, the implications for the discussion on the purpose of Romans would be vast. If the epistle to the Romans was intended as a written statement of Paul's position on the issues addressed in the Corinthian letters, anyone who might understand Romans as having been written to deal with specific issues in the Roman church would necessarily be dismissed. Further, it

²⁰ Chester W. Quimby, *The Great Redemption* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1950), 202.

²¹ Manson, 4-15.

would be unreasonable to conclude that the epistle was written for the purpose of preparing for a visit to Rome.²²

However, Manson's understanding, while well argued, seems to fall short of accounting for a number of pieces of evidence that stand in opposition to his theory. First, in order to accept Manson's theory, one must also accept the speculation that Romans sixteen was written as an addendum to a letter sent to the church at Ephesus. However, the evidence suggests that Romans sixteen very well may have been included in the original text of Romans. Bornkamm rightly suggests that chapter one and chapter fourteen of the epistle too strongly show that Paul wrote the epistle with a single destination in mind—the city of Rome. Each of these chapters refers to the destination of the letter as a well-known city that Paul has not visited. Neither of these criteria fits Ephesus. Paul knew Ephesus well. Moreover, Ephesus was not nearly as “well-known” in general as was Rome.²³

In order to reinforce this argument that chapter sixteen was included in the original epistle, one must consider the lack of support for arguments to the contrary. First, to support his claim that chapter sixteen was not included in the original text, Manson argues that the names of those whom Paul greets in Romans sixteen are not names generally given to Roman Jews, but to Asians or Ephesians. In defense of this line of reasoning, one might consider that it is not necessarily the case that a Jew must have a Jewish name. Donfried writes, “...we have sufficient evidence from papyri and inscriptions which indicates that, both in the diaspora as well as in Palestine, the changing of personal names was a common practice. The Jews acquired not only Greek, but Latin

²² Manson, 14.

and Egyptian appellations.” In light of this, it is quite plausible that the names in Romans sixteen could have belonged to Roman Jews.

Second, those who, like Manson, argue for the exclusion of Romans sixteen from the original text do so because they feel it is unlikely that Paul, who had never visited Rome, could have known so many people in the Roman church as to be able to send a list of greetings. To answer this argument, one must turn to the history surrounding the writing of Romans. It is probable that in the period when Jews were expelled from Rome under the Edict of Claudius, Paul got to know some of them outside of Rome. Therefore, Paul may well have known a number of people in Rome without having actually visited the city.²⁴

Thirdly, one should consider the fact that Timothy is introduced in Romans 16:21 as Paul’s “co-worker.” “The eastern churches to which the rest of Paul’s letters were addressed knew Timothy. For them this introduction was not necessary, while it makes sense in a letter to the Romans.”²⁵ If chapter sixteen had been written to churches aside from Rome, it would be rather odd for Paul to feel compelled to introduce Timothy to the eastern churches if they already knew who Timothy was.²⁶

The burden of proof for the notion that Romans sixteen was not in the original text lies on those who wish to break from the traditional view. The fact is, this burden simply has not been met.²⁷ The evidence all suggests that Romans sixteen was not an addendum to a letter that was sent to the Ephesians, but was contained in the original

²³ Günther Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans as Paul’s Last Will and Testament,” in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 22.

²⁴ Karl P. Donfried, “A Short Note on Romans 16” (*SNR16*), in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 48.

²⁵ Peter Lampe, “The Roman Christians of Romans 16,” in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 218-219.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

letter written to the Romans. With the fall of the argument that Romans sixteen was not a part of the original document, so goes Manson's speculation that Romans was composed as a means by which Paul could disperse his conclusions on the issues addressed in Corinthian correspondence. Hence, the question of the occasion of Romans persists.²⁸

A Visit to Give Apostolic Authority to the Church at Rome?

Klein proposes a second, but less popular, theory. In his reading of Romans, Klein found difficulty in reconciling Paul's pressing need to visit Rome with what Klein terms the "non-interference clause" of Romans 15:20. In this verse, Paul says that he feels compelled to preach the Gospel where it has not yet been preached, rather than to "build on someone else's foundation." In order to reconcile Paul's desire to visit Rome to "preach the Gospel" with this verse, Klein argues that Paul felt that the foundation of the Roman church was inadequate. In turn, Paul desired to give the church an "apostolic foundation."²⁹

There are a number of significant problems with Klein's hypothesis. First, one must consider the means by which many churches were developed in early Christianity. "There must have been many churches in the first century which had been founded by itinerant Christians of the rank and file. Must some apostle have visited each of them before it could be accepted as a Christian church?"³⁰ The answer to this question is simply "no." It is evident that Paul thinks the Roman church has a firm foundation.³¹ Further, one must consider that Paul states he is going to be merely "passing through"

²⁷ Donfried, *FPSR*, 104.

²⁸ Donfried, *SNR16*, 48.

²⁹ Klein, 37-43.

³⁰ Morris, 12.

³¹ See, for instance, Rom 1:7-8 where Paul shares his thanks for the solidarity of the church at Rome. Also, see Rom 15:14 in which Paul states his confidence in the ability of the church at Rome to keep itself strong.

Rome.³² How might it be possible that Paul could build an “apostolic foundation” as he was merely passing through? It is clear that this was not his mission; he had other plans in mind.³³

While Klein’s theory is a respectable suggestion, it does not have adequate exegetical support. Paul simply gives no inkling of the idea that the church at Rome has a weak foundation. In fact, in Romans fifteen, Paul makes it very clear that he is quite confident in the adequacy of the church at Rome. Klein relies heavily upon Romans 15:20 for his hypothesis. One must consider the context of this verse before he concludes that Paul is refusing to do any work where the Gospel has already been presented. In context, Paul offers verse twenty as an explanation for why he has hereto been unable to visit Rome. In other words, he feels a primary obligation and responsibility to preach the Gospel to those who have not yet heard.³⁴ Klein fails to recognize the context of this verse and, in turn, fails to see Paul’s apology for not having visited Rome previously. Unfortunately, like Manson, Klein’s theory fails to explain Paul’s purpose in writing this epistle to the Romans.³⁵

The Letter for Jerusalem?

Jervell also provides a hypothesis for the purpose of Romans that fails to stand. Jervell argues that the epistle to the Romans was indeed sent to Rome, but that the message was intended for Jerusalem.³⁶ At first glance, it seems that Jervell’s view could be dismissed entirely without much loss. However, a serious consideration of his understanding on the matter provides good insight for the discussion. While Jervell

³² See, for instance, Rom 15:24

³³ Morris, 12.

³⁴ See Rom 15:21-22.

³⁵ Morris, 12.

seemed to miss the mark in so far as his assertion that Romans was intended as a message to Jerusalem, his suggestion that Paul wrote to gain support for his journey to Jerusalem is excellent. While Paul was not as focused upon Jerusalem nearly as much as Jervell suggests, “It is quite possible...that in writing this letter Paul has in certain respects the problems of Jerusalem in mind...”³⁷ It is a fact that, in Romans, Paul asks for prayerful support for his missionary journey to Jerusalem and, with that in mind, he provided the Romans with a glimpse into the situation in Jerusalem. However, Jervell argues that Paul was exclusively seeking support for the journey to Jerusalem.³⁸

In response to Jervell, one must ask why the letter would have been sent to Rome if it was, as Jervell suggests, “the letter to Jerusalem.”³⁹ Would it not have been more sensible of Paul to send a letter to the church at Jerusalem to prepare the way for his upcoming encounter with them? Secondly, Romans contains much more than a simple request for support of missionary journeys. Had this been Paul’s exclusive purpose for writing, would it not be reasonable to explicitly ask for support and to provide more detail about the situation at Jerusalem? Certainly this explanation accounts for some portions of the epistle, but it fails to explain the purpose of the epistle as a whole.⁴⁰

Tension Between the Weak and the Strong

Karris and Minear, who have only slight differences in their understanding of the purpose of Romans, both suggest that Romans was written to confront the issues between

³⁶ Hence, Jervell entitles his work “The Letter to Jerusalem”; see Jervell, p. 56

³⁷ Marxsen, 95.

³⁸ On page 57 of his work, Jervell cites Rom 15:30-32 to explain that Paul did not have Spain in mind at all when he wrote Rom.

³⁹ Morris, 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the “weak and strong” discussed in chapter fourteen and following.⁴¹ Karris and Minear both suggest that the weak and strong corresponded to two communities in Rome that were experiencing friction.⁴² These two scholars suggest that the primary purpose of Romans must be to deal with the conflict between these two factions within the church at Rome. While Minear suggested that “the weak” was a reference to the Jews and “the strong” as a reference to the Gentiles, Karris argues that these were simply two quarrelling factions within the community of the church at Rome.⁴³

In either case, there are a number of difficulties with this theory. First, one should notice that, in Romans, Paul never gives the idea that he is coming to Rome to be a mediator between the two factions. Further, Minear’s suggestion that the two factions are Jews and Gentiles seems unwarranted since there is no evidence to support this claim either within the epistle or in the issues themselves. The issues Paul brings up of eating meat and drinking wine are not issues specifically related to the Jews.⁴⁴ Further, one cannot help but note that Paul’s treatment of the issues between the weak and strong is not extensive. If Paul wished to primarily deal with these two factions in the church at Rome, it would be odd for him not to dig into these issues before he nears the closing of the epistle. Moreover, Stott notes that Paul—a Jew—does not identify himself with the “weak,” but with the “strong.”⁴⁵ It would, therefore, seem unlikely that Paul was speaking of Jews as the weak. Again, Minear and Karris make valiant attempts at

⁴¹ Robert J Karris, “Romans 14:1-15:13 and the Occasion of Romans,” in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 66-68.

⁴³ Karris, 66-84.

⁴⁴ Morris, 14

⁴⁵ Stott, John, *Romans* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), 369.

providing a correct understanding for the purpose of Romans but, once again, their explanations do not quite answer the question of the purpose of Romans.⁴⁶

Paul's Reflection on His Life?

Bornkamm suggests that Romans reflects Paul's history of his own life and struggles and that the diatribe⁴⁷ within the epistle is Paul's discussion with his "pre-Christian, Jewish self." However, once again, this explanation, while respectable, does not quite fit. If this were the case, one must wonder why Paul would feel compelled to write his reflections down. Moreover, it would be questionable as to why Paul would ever send such a composition to Rome.⁴⁸ The search for the answer to the Romans question continues.

The Dual Purpose of Romans

At this point, it might seem that one has exhausted the possibilities for the correct understanding of the purpose of Romans. However, there are further explanations that provide crucial insight into this discussion. First, it is fundamental to understand the events surrounding the composition of Romans. It is held in common agreement among scholars that the epistle to the Romans was written somewhere between the middle and late 50's A.D. The Edict of Claudius expelled all Jews, both Christian and non-Christian, from Rome in approximately A.D. 49.⁴⁹ Therefore, the epistle to the Romans was written just after the Edict of Claudius expired in Rome with the death of Claudius around A.D. 54. In this period of Jewish exile, the Gentile Christians would have been forced to assume leadership of the church. In turn, it is quite reasonable to assume that problems

⁴⁶ Morris, 14.

⁴⁷ "Diatribe" is the technical term used to describe the epistolary form that involves an author writing an "imaginary discussion" with himself. Paul uses this form extensively throughout the Roman epistle.

⁴⁸ Morris, 8-9.

arose in the church after the Jews returned to Rome.⁵⁰ This accounts for Paul's lengthy discussion on the relationship between the Jew and the Gentile in the Roman church. It seems that Paul wrote Romans, at least in part, to bring unity among the Jews and Gentiles in Rome.⁵¹ Herein lies the first purpose of the book of Romans.

Donfried argues that Romans was written with this purpose exclusively in mind. He notes that, without exception, all other Pauline writings are specific to a problem within the church. Therefore, Donfried argues, one must assume that Romans likewise deals with local issues within the church. It does, however, seem unfair to deduce that it is necessary for *all* of Paul's writings to be written to confront local church issues simply because the majority of his writings are written for this purpose. It is arguable that since Paul knows that the condition of the church at Rome is strong, he was not compelled to be strong in a rebuke to the Romans. Jervell writes, "...the major presupposition for an understanding of Romans is that one frees oneself from the idea that a Pauline letter is primarily determined by the situation of the recipients."⁵² It is at least plausible to hold that the purpose of the book of Romans is partially found in Paul's needs.

Klein concurs with Donfried and feels that it is unacceptable to view Romans as having been written for anything other than to deal with problems in Rome. Klein feels that if one concedes Paul wrote simply in preparation for a visit, Paul would be viewed as having an "ulterior motive" in writing theology. Klein writes, "...[T]heology would be reduced to merely a means to an end; nothing but grist for his apostolic calling card."⁵³

⁴⁹ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1932), xx.

⁵⁰ Donfried, *SNR16*, 48.

⁵¹ Klein, 35.

⁵² Jacob Jervell, "The Letter to Jerusalem," in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 55-56.

⁵³ Klein, 33.

It would have been inappropriate, in Klein's view, for an apostle to develop his theology for the purpose of his own gain.

While Klein raises some important concerns, one must understand that Paul was not seeking to promote or defend himself, but rather the Gospel of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Moreover, Paul was compelled to defend his credibility so that he could continue to be an effective minister of the Gospel. It is vital to understand that his efforts were not self-serving, but God-serving.

Numerous credible biblical scholars concur that Paul wrote Romans to prepare for his upcoming visit to Rome. F.F. Bruce feels that "...there is [now] general agreement that Paul sent [the epistle of Romans] to prepare the Roman Christians for his prospective visit."⁵⁴ In chapter one, the letter itself alludes to the fact that this is the occasion of Romans: to make way for a visit.⁵⁵ If this analysis of Paul's purpose for Romans is correct, one must question why Paul would feel compelled to outline his theology in order to prepare for his visit.

In all likelihood, Paul felt compelled to outline his theology because he was not particularly popular with the Jews of his time.⁵⁶ The Jews had formerly viewed him as a hero in his persecution of the Christians. Jews now saw him simply as an outspoken proponent of Christianity and, in turn, an enemy of traditional Judaism. Furthermore, even the Jews who had converted to Christianity saw Paul as trampling their Jewish heritage by allowing so much room for Gentiles in the church.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ F.F. Bruce, "The Romans Debate—Continued," in *Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 182.

⁵⁵ Jervell, 54.

⁵⁶ See Romans 3:8—Paul makes reference to those who slandered him by twisting his teaching.

⁵⁷ Bornkamm, 17.

Paul knew that his message had been skewed by the Jews (Romans 3:8) and was writing to set the record straight.⁵⁸ In order to ensure a warm reception in Rome, it was necessary for him to write to prepare the way. Since Paul felt compelled to invoke the involvement and support of the Roman church in his upcoming missionary journeys to Spain and Jerusalem,⁵⁹ he likely felt compelled to outline a considered statement of the Gospel.⁶⁰ He directed this statement of the Gospel to the Roman church simply to dispel the suspicions aroused by his Jewish opposition.⁶¹ If Paul had allowed the accusations against him to stand, it is unlikely that the Roman church would have given him a warm reception. It is further unlikely that they would have supported his ministry to Spain and Jerusalem if he had not diffused such suspicions. “With [the Roman Epistle] before them, the leaders of the church of Rome will be able to judge for themselves whether Paul is the dangerous innovator he was represented to be by his Jewish-Christian opponents, or a missionary whose work they can heartily support.”⁶²

Stuhlmacher suggests, “[One of] the main reasons why the debate about the purpose of Romans has so far remained unresolved [is because] Paul himself appears to give contradictory reasons for writing this letter...”⁶³ Like the argument that Paul was writing to deal with some of the issues emerging between the Jews and Gentiles after the Edict of Claudius was repealed, the explanation that Paul’s purpose in writing Romans was to prepare for a visit is equally as convincing. However, these two purposes are not at odds. Rather, it is sensible to say that Paul wrote both to prepare the way for a visit

⁵⁸ Bruce, 183.

⁵⁹ Bruce, 193; also see Rom 15:23ff

⁶⁰ Dodd suggests that Paul felt that Rome might serve as a good “base of operations” for his ministry to Spain (p. xxv). If his suggestion were correct, it would be all the more necessary for Paul to establish rapport with the Rom. However, this view is based upon little more than speculation.

⁶¹ Robinson, 8.

⁶² Dodd, xxv.

and, simultaneously, took opportunity to confront the issues that challenged the Roman church. fs

It seems quite reasonable, then, to conclude that Paul had a dual purpose in writings Romans. First, he wanted to prepare the way for a visit to Rome. This was a wise move when one considers the extent to which Jews opposed him. As an extension of this purpose, it seems probable that Paul was seeking prayer and support for his future missionary efforts to Rome, Spain, and Jerusalem. Paul's second purpose, then, was to promote unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome. This was necessary because of the tension that had arisen between Jews and Gentiles after the Edict of Claudius was lifted in Rome and the Christian Jews returned to the Roman church. While scholars provide a multitude of possibilities for the occasion of Romans, this dual purpose is most compelling. Further, it accounts best for the subject matter Paul covers within the text of Romans.

⁶³ Stuhlmacher, p. 233.

II. THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF DOCTRINE IN THE ROMAN EPISTLE

The epistle to the Romans contains a deep wealth of truths that have eternal significance and, in turn, relevance for the contemporary reader. In Romans, Paul deals with sin, the guilt of all humanity, the grace of God, Christian obedience, God's sovereign election, sanctification, and justification by faith. However, Romans is much more than some complex work of doctrine or theology. It also has significant bearing upon the ethics and daily life of the Christian. In a birds-eye view of Romans, one will find that the epistle opens with a discussion in some detail of several of the major doctrines of the faith, then moves on to deal with the social and ethical realms of daily Christian living.⁶⁴

A Limited Structure

One must understand that Romans is not a book that deals with stale issues of little significance for today's reader. On the contrary, the doctrines and principles set out in Romans continue to hold relevance. While Paul frequently discusses issues within a

⁶⁴ Marxsen, 95.

framework that has little relevance for the contemporary reader, he reveals bits of truth within this framework. The truths, principles, and doctrines Paul reveals in the book of Romans are timeless.

Take, for example, Romans chapter fourteen. In this chapter, Paul deals with the problem of tension between the weak and the strong in the Roman church. One of the issues Paul addresses is the fact that the “weak” refuse to eat meat and the “strong” do not feel that they should be required to abstain from meat simply because it offends the weaker brother. Paul, however, tells the “strong” in the Roman church that they *should* abstain from eating meat out of respect and love for their brother. In modern America, this issue of eating or not eating meat is largely a “non-issue.” However, the principle behind the passage remains: the Christian should, out of love, yield to his weaker brother’s conscience.

This is a case where the structure of Paul’s argument has less application to the contemporary Christian than to the early Christian, but the principle behind the structure—to yield to the weaker brother’s conscience—still stands for the contemporary Christian. Such is the case with much of Romans. As one reads this epistle, he will find that much of the book takes form in addressing issues that have little or no relevance to the modern Christian. However, it is immensely important for the Christian to fully consider the principles behind the instruction Paul gives; the principles Paul outlines in this epistle almost always have fresh application.

Paul’s Diagnosis of the Human Condition

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul demonstrates that the Gentiles lived in idolatry and immorality. Next, in Romans 2:1-16, Paul confronts those who judge the Gentiles by

comparing themselves to the Gentiles. Romans 2:17-3:8 is Paul's argument that the Jews are also in desperate need of the grace of God. They have the law, but do not obey it. With a final sweeping blow, in Romans 3:9-20, Paul concludes that all humanity is doomed to the wrath of God.⁶⁵

These condemnations of humanity contain two truths that are relevant for the modern-day Christian. First, Paul's diagnosis of humanity is not hopeful. Paul discloses that all men are in complete depravity and are hopelessly separated from God. In turn, they have no means by which to save themselves. Romans 1:18-3:20 certainly challenges the modern-day belief that men are "basically good." For centuries, people have been unsuccessful as they try to operate under this presupposition. Communism is an extreme example of a system in which this conception has been applied and has miserably failed. Largely, the reason communism has failed is because, as Paul says: "... 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"⁶⁶

In addition to challenging this contemporary idea that man is "basically good," Romans 1:18-3:20 provides a much more personal application. If the reader is unaware of sin in his life prior to an encounter with Romans, he will certainly find that Romans serves as a "magnifying glass" for sin.⁶⁷ The law serves to expose these sins and, in turn, the exposure should leave the sinful man gasping for the grace of God. Those who have been called by God will find a sufficiency in God's grace that is beyond measure. "After the long dark night the sun has risen and a new day has dawned, and the world is flooded

⁶⁵ Stott, 68.

⁶⁶ Hunter, 20; Scripture taken from Rom 3:10-12

with light. ‘But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known...’ (21a). It is a fresh revelation, focusing on Christ and his cross...”⁶⁸

For those who have the audacity to think they are still standing after Paul’s exposition of the sinfulness of man, Paul has further ammunition. As one reads Romans chapter five, he finds that it is not only man’s own personal sin that condemns him, but also the sin of Adam that is imputed to him. In other words, man not only commits individual acts of sin, but also experiences “guilt by imputation” in which, simply by being associated with Adam, Adam’s sin is counted against every man. Since Adam was a member of humanity, all humanity has the sin of Adam imputed to them in what is commonly referred to as a “sinful nature.”⁶⁹ Again, the contemporary relevance and application of this doctrine is clear: repent and trust in God!

Justification by Faith...The Standing Offer

After setting forth that all men stand desperately in need of God’s salvation, one must affirm that the offer of salvation set forth in Romans is just as available to the contemporary reader as it was for its Roman reader.⁷⁰ This offer of salvation is available by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as the sin of Adam is imputed to the Christian, so also is the righteousness of Christ after man has been drawn to a saving faith in Christ. This truth is not something that will pass away, but will stand through the ages: God’s grace is as sufficient today as it was yesterday, and the day before!⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stott, 108.

⁶⁹ Barclay, 80.

⁷⁰ Hunter, 21.

⁷¹ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans.*, vol. 1, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 203-210.

Justification by faith is one of the most central doctrines considered in the book of Romans. Many of the Jews at the time Paul wrote Romans clung to their former Jewish understanding of justification through adherence to the law. As a result, Paul felt compelled to explain that justification is not through works of the law, but through faith in Christ, Jesus. In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul tells the Christian that God exhibits wrath against any attempt at self-salvation. Seeking to save oneself is simply self-defeating.⁷² In Romans 3:21-4:25, Paul promotes that salvation is available solely by faith in Jesus Christ.⁷³

Paul further illustrates the point that justification is by faith, and not by one's own works, in Romans 9:30-33. In this passage, Paul states that Israel was not saved because it sought its salvation by works. "Having the conceit of the self-righteous, —that some day they would attain God's final acceptance of their works, they never thought of needing God's *mercy*, or of 'simply trusting.'"⁷⁴ The implications of Israel's failure to attain salvation through works continue to prove startling when one considers the emphasis Roman Catholicism places upon a "faith plus works" salvation.⁷⁵

While a present-day Protestant might think he has no trouble in understanding justification by faith, it is a concept that continues to be of pressing relevance in his discussions with Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many other religious sects and cults that teach that justification is something that may be earned outside of faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, most Protestants do not live their lives in harmony with

⁷² Ralph P Martin, "Reconciliation: Romans 5:1-11," in *Romans & the People of God*, ed. Sven K. Soderland and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 37-38.

⁷³ Stott, 111-118.

⁷⁴ William R Newell, *Romans: Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Grace Publications, Inc., 1938), 382.

⁷⁵ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, revised in one volume (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 424.

their belief in justification by faith. The book of Romans serves as a daily reminder that there is nothing in or about the Christian that should make God want to choose him for salvation. On the contrary, the Christian's salvation is entirely dependent upon God. The Protestant may feel that he has his doctrine of justification by faith [alone!] in place, but it is likely that he lives his life, at least sometimes, trying to maintain self-sufficiency and trying to "impress God"—and others—by his works and "spirituality."

Salvation is not an outward work of the individual, but is an inward work of the Spirit. The epistle to the Romans serves as a blatant reminder to the Christian that his salvation is a free gift of God—the works of the Christian count for nothing. It is vitally important that Christians rigorously preserve and promote this key doctrine of the Christian faith in their hearts, in their homes, and in their churches.

The Continued Relevance of Paul's Discussion of Circumcision

In Romans 2:28-29, Paul discusses circumcision. Since circumcision was the outward sign of the covenant, Jewish people felt that it was an outward evidence of their salvation. As a result, they relied upon a simple sign of the covenant to save them. However, Paul echoes his argument that salvation is not by outward works, but by faith. Therefore, he says, if a man is circumcised but has no faith, his circumcision is worthless. On the other hand, if a man is not circumcised but has faith, he is in a position equivalent to that of being circumcised.⁷⁶

The principle behind this discussion continues to apply in several dimensions. First, those to whom the New Testament sign of the covenant has been applied (baptism) are not saved unless they have faith. Moreover, those who believe they belong to God

⁷⁶ Stott, 92-94.

because they have an outward appearance of being of saved are fooling themselves; Christianity is something that permeates from the inside to the outside; not vice versa. Neither baptism, nor simple church membership will save an individual. Rather the Christian is saved when he is inwardly “baptized” into the church of Christ.⁷⁷

No Place for Racism in the Body of Christ

In addition to the Jewish sentiment that works could bring about salvation, many Jews had great difficulty understanding how salvation might be applied to those outside Israel. Paul provides a lengthy discourse on the place of the Jews and the place of the Gentiles within the Kingdom of God. Building upon the concept of justification by faith, Paul argues that anyone who believes may be justified by faith. Therefore, salvation is available to everyone—whether Jew or Gentile.⁷⁸

The salvation of God continues to be available to everyone. This incredibly important truth has significant application for the contemporary church. It is vital for the church to remember that God does not limit his salvation to particular races. Rather, salvation is available to people from all races. In American churches, racism is still very alive; Paul calls the Christian to reject racism. Just as people from every nationality have sinned, so also is the Gospel of Jesus Christ offered to people from every nationality. Moreover, those whom Christ calls from other nations will enter into brotherhood and sisterhood with other Christians. Therefore, the Christian has a continuing obligation to his brothers and sisters in Christ who are of the same race as well as those who fall outside his own race. In the eyes of the Jews, if there was anyone undeserving of salvation, it was the Gentiles who had formerly surrendered themselves to paganism.

⁷⁷ Newell, 70-71.

⁷⁸ See Rom 3:21-31 and Rom, chapter 4

Paul calls for the Jews to set aside their differences with the Gentiles and for the Jews and Gentiles to accept one another as co-heirs of the Kingdom. Likewise, it is vitally necessary for those in the contemporary church to break down walls of racism and to embrace one another in the name of Jesus Christ.⁷⁹

**Abusing the Grace of God:
No new Novelty**

It is clear from the Roman epistle that the Christian is not under the law, but under grace.⁸⁰ Paul feels compelled to confront two issues that arise in the ancient church because of this doctrine. First, there are many Christians who might have taken license to sin because sin increased the outpouring of God's grace. Paul felt compelled to refute this suggestion by making it clear that the abuse of the grace of God must not be permitted.⁸¹

While the contemporary Christian might not feel compelled to sin simply to increase the outpouring of God's grace, it is important to note the principle behind Paul's message. In view of God's grace and mercy, Christians are to be obedient. It continues to be a pressing issue for Christians not to abuse the grace of God by taking license to sin simply because they know that their trespass will be forgiven. Rather, the Christian—because he has been saved by grace and is united with Christ—should seek to serve God with his whole heart.

The second issue Paul felt compelled to address in the early church was the antinomian suggestion that arose out of the statement that man is not under the law, but

⁷⁹Holmes Rolston, *The Social Message of the Apostle Paul* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1942), 124-147.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Rom 6:14

⁸¹ Murray, 211-223; See Rom 6:1-14

under God's grace.⁸² If the Christian is not under the law, why should he be obedient? Again, for the contemporary Christian, the problem takes different form. Antinomianism does not take the same form today as it did in the early church. On the other hand, abuse of the grace of God persists.⁸³ The Christian must no longer willingly submit himself to sin. Rather, he must abandon his sinfulness and submit himself wholly unto God and allow God to use him as a vessel of service, just as wholly as he submitted himself to sinfulness.⁸⁴ This truth continues to hold for the contemporary reader. If man submits into slavery unto sin, he will find that his due punishment is death. On the other hand, if he submits himself in obedience to God through faith in Jesus Christ, he will find that he will be declared righteous, by which God will grant him eternal life.⁸⁵ In turn, the Christian will be an heir to the Kingdom of God.⁸⁶

The Christian must not affix himself to the notion that he is not under the law. Rather, the Christian must become focused upon the fact that he is under grace. He is to live in a debt to love, which does not promote sinfulness.⁸⁷ Romans chapter seven is an illustration that demonstrates that while the Christian may not be under the law he *is* under Christ. Therefore, he must act accordingly. It is certain that the Christian is declared righteous in the sight of God and is no longer in bondage to sin, but—in response to grace—he must strive for Christian obedience.⁸⁸ At the same time, the Christian will continue to experience the pull of sin upon his flesh.

⁸² See Rom 6:15-23

⁸³ Murray, 211-223.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

⁸⁵ See Rom 6:15-23 and Rom 8:12-17.

⁸⁶ See Rom 8:17.

⁸⁷ Dodd, 205-206; see Rom 13:8-10.

⁸⁸ See also Rom 8:1-11.

It is also necessary to follow up this discussion of the call for obedience by stating that obedience does not negate justification by faith. Rather, it supports the doctrine of justification by faith. The Christian is only able to exhibit true obedience to God as the Spirit enables him. However, it is not the work that saves the individual, but it is the outpouring of God's grace through faith.⁸⁹

The Continued Relevance of the Doctrine of Election

Romans chapter nine deals with the doctrine of election. In this chapter, Paul discusses the election of the nation of Israel, as well as the election of individuals. The doctrine of election has numerous implications for the contemporary Christian. For instance, the Christian may rest in the fact that God, who is sovereign, has the ability to call whomever He wills. If God were not sovereign, He would not be God. Therefore, the contemporary Christian may rest in the fact that God has complete knowledge and control over everything that comes to pass.

The sovereignty of God discussed in Romans chapter nine also has broad implications for evangelism. It is not the evangelist's primarily his responsibility to get a person to "accept Christ." Rather, it is a matter of God accepting the individual. Therefore, the Christian who evangelizes may take comfort in knowing that the only burden upon him is to faithfully preach the message of the Gospel. The work of quickening the individual and the work of conversion are left to the Spirit. Therefore, the Christian should feel obligation to witness, but should not feel misplaced guilt if his efforts do not avail.⁹⁰

⁸⁹John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 400-404.

⁹⁰Boice, 516-517 (*cf.* Stott, 315).

The doctrine of election has contemporary relevance in the Christian's assurance of salvation, as well. If God had a plan for every individual from the beginning of the world, the destiny of every individual has been predetermined. Therefore, the Christian may rest in knowing that his salvation is not something that can be gained and lost. Rather, God will remain faithful to His promises. If the Christian does not remain in Christ, his claim to original faith is suspect. Romans 8:28-30 reminds the Christian that it is God who does the drawing of the individual to himself.⁹¹

⁹¹ Karl Barth. *The Epistle to the Romans*, sixth edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 325.

III. SEVEN POINTS OF RELEVANCE IN ROMANS TWELVE AND FOLLOWING

Paul shifts his focus in from Romans twelve through the end of the epistle. While Romans chapters one through eleven are primarily concerned with a discussion of doctrinal matters, Romans twelve and following are primarily concerned with the daily life and the ethics of the Christian. In these chapters, Paul explains what the Christian's life should look like in his heart, his society, his church, and in his country. It is self-evident that this outline of the "Christian ethic" in Romans chapters twelve and following is just as usable today as it was in Paul's time.⁹² In this section, Paul makes a number of calls to the Roman Christians that continue to stand for contemporary Christianity. For the purpose of discussion, Romans twelve and following may be broken down into seven basic principles by which the contemporary Christian should guide his life.⁹³

Principle One: Live a Holy Life

First, the Christian should keep himself wholly consecrated unto Christ. Paul begins Romans chapter twelve with a resounding "Therefore..." intended to imply that

⁹² Hunter, 21.

what he has written through chapter eleven serves as the grounds on which the Christian should do the things Paul is about to discuss. In other words, in Romans chapters one through eleven, Paul has discussed doctrines that have significant bearing upon the lives of those who believe them. Chapters one through eleven discuss the way to salvation, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The “therefore” of Romans 12:1, then, refers back to the Christian understanding of these doctrines by which God has shown His mercies.⁹⁴

Therefore, the mercies of God (which Paul has described to this point) serve as grounds for the Christian to offer his entire being as a living sacrifice to God.⁹⁵ The Christian should strive to be obedient to the grace of God offered through Jesus Christ.⁹⁶ This is especially pertinent in mainstream churches that are increasingly open the door to sin and even to lifestyles characterized by sin, such as homosexuality. In marked opposition to this kind of thinking, Paul argues that the Christian should strive for holiness, making every effort to eradicate sin in his life. The contemporary church could certainly learn something about the necessity of the pursuit for holiness.

Principle Two: “Be not conformed...”

The second principle by which the present-day Christian should guide his life has strong relation to the first. Namely, the Christian should seek to live his life in non-conformity to the world. In a manner similar to the way the church has surrendered to ungodliness, the contemporary church has also largely surrendered itself to secularization. Mainstream churches have largely bought into the mentality that they must conform to the standards of society in order to attract members. This mentality runs

⁹³ Quimby, 173-188.

⁹⁴ Quimby, 171.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 173-174.

against the very grain of Scripture. In Romans 12, Paul makes it quite clear that the Christian must not simply “go with the flow” of secular society. Rather, the Christian is called to continually renew his mind and to submit himself to the authority of God and His Word. Again, the contemporary church has much to [re-] learn from this principle.⁹⁷

Principle Three: Live in Humble obedience

The third principle by which the Christian might guide his life is also found in Romans chapter twelve. The Christian must live in humility, not thinking “more highly of himself than he ought.” This seems to be an issue with many contemporary Christians struggle. Like the Jews of Paul’s time, the Christian often views himself as “superior” to the non-Christian because he has been included among the elect. Many present day Christians seek to live a “super-spiritual life” in which they strive for recognition. Paul certainly would have stood in marked opposition to this behavior. Paul argued that the Christian has no boasting-rights. Rather, the Christian is to live in humility before the Lord.⁹⁸

Additionally, just as it is important for the Christian to realize his gifts and the capacities with which he might serve the church, it is equally important for the Christian to realize his limitations, as well. Not everyone is gifted with the same gifts. Therefore, the Christian should defer to others who are more gifted than they are in certain areas.⁹⁹ Paul makes a call to the heart of the Christian. He exhorts the Christian to offer himself in full service to God in humility. This humility also means realizing one’s limitations.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Quimby, 174-175.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 174-176.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 176-177.

¹⁰⁰ Dodd, 194; See Rom 12:1-5.

On the other hand, just as the early Christians were to offer themselves in full service to God, so also are Christians in the modern church. If the Christian is serving God in his heart, his daily affairs will necessarily be in order as he seeks to submit himself to obedience in Christ. Therefore, the modern-day Christian must offer himself to God as an instrument to be used.¹⁰¹ In turn, the Christian's daily life will reflect the love of God. Paul exhorts the Christian to delight himself in those things that are righteous. Paul also makes a plea to live in humility. These are the fruits by which it is observable that an individual is a believer; he offers himself as an instrument of the Lord.¹⁰²

Principles Four and Five: Live in Love and Fellowship

The fourth principle one might derive from Romans twelve and following is that the Christian must live in fellowship with other believers.¹⁰³ It is certainly worth noting that Paul had a deep passion for his brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰⁴ His discussion of the need for unity among the many parts of the body of the church demonstrates that Paul placed heavy value upon relationships.

The fifth principle is an extension of the fourth. In addition to being a member of a church body, the Christian has a duty to help and love his neighbors.¹⁰⁵ In Romans, chapters twelve and following, Paul goes to great lengths to discuss the importance that Christians care for and love one another, as well as their enemies. Echoing Christ's exhortation to love those who stand in opposition to the Christian, Romans serves to

¹⁰¹ See Rom 6:19.

¹⁰² Dodd, 194; See Rom 12:1-5.

¹⁰³ Quimby, 177-178.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, the discussion of his longing to visit his fellow believers in Rom 1 & 15. Also, consider the lengths to which Paul went to provide individual greetings to the Rom in chapter 16. He placed a strong value upon relationships and fellowship.

¹⁰⁵ Quimby, 178-181.

remind the Christian of his debt to show the love of Christ to everyone he encounters. The Christian should reflect the grace and love of Jesus Christ in his daily encounters with his neighbors as well as to those who might stand in opposition.

Christian love is still a central concept to authentic Christianity today. The Christian life must be characterized by love.¹⁰⁶ Christian love exhibited to a non-Christian is at its best when the Christian evangelizes the non-Christian. If the Christian is expressing love to a brother or sister in Christ, he will do so by conducting his affairs fairly with those he encounters and by showing mercy and compassion to those who are hurting or in need. Furthermore, the Christian will show patience, love, hospitality, sympathy, and love to his brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰⁷

This call for love has special place in the contemporary church. While it is a call that transcends time, it has particular relevance for the modern church because in recent years, secular organizations have performed better in showing love to those in need. Christianity is largely perceived as a religion in which people worry only about themselves. The time has arrived for the church to change this image and to re-take the reigns from these non-Christian charities that have emerged in the vacuum left by the church.

Principle Six: Submit to Authority

The sixth principle the modern-day reader of Romans might apply to his life is an extension of the fifth. Namely, that the Christian should be an exemplary citizen. The Christian is called to submit himself to authority and, in turn, to reflect the peacefulness of the Christian faith. If the Christian lives his life in obedience to the authorities God

¹⁰⁶ Rom 13:8-10.

¹⁰⁷ Stott, 332-333.

has ordained, he will serve as an example to those around him and, in turn, will be a witness to the cross of Christ.¹⁰⁸

In Paul's day, there was a group of Jewish radicals who were advocating a revolt against the government. Therefore, Paul felt compelled to tell his Christian brethren of the necessity for submission to the authorities God has put into place.¹⁰⁹ While most contemporary Christians in the Western church are not in a position in which they must decide whether or not they will rise up in revolt against their government, Christians are forced to decide the extent to which they will submit themselves to government and other authorities over them.¹¹⁰

On the one hand, Paul reminds the Christian that there is no authority in place that was not established by God.¹¹¹ Therefore, he who disobeys earthly authority also indirectly disobeys God. On the other hand, "It should be apparent...that Paul not only places civil government under God, but he implicitly and surely requires that civil government comply with God's law."¹¹² This is not to say that governments will be entirely guided by the law of God, but it is to say that if a government asks of a Christian what God's Word forbids, the Christian must remain faithful to the higher authority—Almighty God.¹¹³

These principles continue to apply for the contemporary Christian. While there is evidence that Paul was primarily dealing with those who were calling for a revolt against the government of the day, it is also true that the life of the Christian must be

¹⁰⁸ Quimby, 181-183.

¹⁰⁹ Dodd, 203-204.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹¹ Rom 13:1-7.

¹¹² Rousas Rushdoony, *Romans and Galatians* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1997), 246.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

characterized by his submission to authority. The Scripture demands from the Christian complete respect to the authorities under which God has placed him. Further, if the Christian is an upstanding citizen, he serves as a witness to Christ.¹¹⁴ Calls for submission to authority are found not just in the book of Romans, but throughout the pages of Scripture. For the Westerner, authorities might include parental authority, church authority, work-related authorities, as well as the authority of the civil government.¹¹⁵

Principle Seven: Seek Peace and Unity

The issues Paul addresses in chapter fourteen have already been discussed briefly in earlier examination of how to apply Romans in general, but the applications and points of relevance are worth repeating in a discussion of the seventh, and final principle to be derived from Romans chapter twelve and following. As mentioned earlier, in general, the contemporary Christian no longer struggles over the issue of whether or not he should eat meat. However, there are a number of broader principles that must be gleaned from this passage. First, Christians should seek unity and try to avoid conflict within the body of Christ.

There are times when this principle cannot be applied. It is sometimes crucial for those who seek to maintain orthodoxy to split off from a decaying church; Paul even did so when he quickly dismissed the Judaizers from the early Christian church. However, the instances of church division should be carefully considered and kept to a bare

¹¹⁴ Dodd, 203-204.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 201.

minimum. There are certainly legitimate conflicts.¹¹⁶ However, many issues arise that are of little consequence and can be settled without causing splintering. In Romans 16:17-19, the Christian is admonished to guard against false teaching. However, church splintering should be avoided when it is possible.¹¹⁷

Within the context of this same discussion in Romans 14, one should consider the implications the “one body, many parts” illustration has for the modern church. In this illustration, Paul refers to the church as a single organism (the one body) with many variously functioning parts. Individuals within the church carry varying roles based upon their gifts. The implication is that the church must work together as a single organism in a similar fashion as do the various parts of the body. Likewise, as the body works toward similar goals, the church is to seek a similar goal in its joint efforts—namely, to reflect the glory of God.¹¹⁸

The bottom line is that Paul ultimately reminds the Christian that he should not allow quarrelling to undo the work of God’s unity in the church. Instead, the church should work together in unity to reflect God’s glory.¹¹⁹ Hence, Paul closes the book of Romans by offering greetings to those in the church at Rome. The same bond that bound the church together nearly 2,000 years ago continues to bind the church today. That shared bond is Jesus Christ. The fact that fellowship and unity are vital to the church is highlighted by Paul’s emphasis upon relationships throughout the book of Romans.

¹¹⁶ In chapter 16, Paul urges the Roman church to be on guard against false doctrine—a clear indication that he saw the necessity to flee from false teaching. What Paul presses here is for the church to live as harmoniously as possible, in light of their common bond in Christ, Jesus.

¹¹⁷ Rom 14:1-15:13.

¹¹⁸ C.H. Dodd, pp. 194-195; See Rom 12:6.

¹¹⁹ Quimby, 186-191.

CONCLUSION

This discussion of the purpose and contemporary relevance of Romans serves only to scratch the surface of the subject matter. Volumes have been written on Romans up through contemporary times and, in all likelihood, there are many volumes more yet to be written on Romans. Amazingly, the authors of such volumes always have some new insight to contribute to the discussion or some better understanding of this magnificent epistle. This serves to reinforce the assertion that Romans *continues* to be incredibly relevant. Further, it reinforces the fact that this book is a tremendously relevant underpinning for the Christian faith.

While the form Paul's argument takes in Romans is not always fully relevant to the contemporary Christian, the content and principles behind his arguments continue to have tremendous pertinence in the lives of Christians throughout the world. The truths contained in Romans are eternally valuable and eternally relevant. It is imperative that Christians read Romans with a hope and belief that the epistle can change their lives, just as it must have changed the lives of those Christians at Rome who first read the epistle in the first century A.D.

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Senior Integration Paper/Project Certification Page

This is to certify that the paper/project prepared by ROBERT M. MITCHELL

Entitled: *THE PURPOSE AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF
PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS*

Has been accepted by Covenant College

This paper/project is not confidential and its use as a sample in future research is not restricted. The work contained herein is either the original work of the author, or properly cited work by other writers.

Purpose. Paul was writing to a church that he had never visited and a casual reading of the epistle does not convey the idea that he was dealing with situational issues (cf. the epistles to the Corinthians). Here Paul wrote with regards to the big picture-laying down the doctrine of soteriology. He wrote that they would know the gospel of Christ.Â Anders Nygren took note of Paul's systematic approach to the gospel in Romans and wrote the following in his commentary: "Step by step, persistently and consistently, he hews his way through the flood of thoughts which present themselves to him as he undertakes to explain the meaning of God's work in Christ." [12]. Ultimately, the Epistle to the Romans is undoubtedly Pauline in its very essence. The "Pauline epistles" letters written by the influential apostle Paul are particularly central to Christian belief. In 2012, we took a tour of many of the Pauline epistles. In conjunction with Lent this year, we're revisiting and expanding this series of articles.Â Paul's Letter to the Romans. Start reading it here: Romans 1. When was it written? Probably around A.D. 55-57, about 25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.Â This letter was written with a number of purposes in mind. Foremost among them was a simple explanation of the gospel of grace; but Paul also wanted to address growing tensions between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians in the church. What does it say? Much of Romans consists of what might be called a "Gospel presentation." Although the Epistle to the Romans was not the first written by Paul, it is well that it is placed first, and next after Acts; for its chief subjects is a discussion of the grounds on which a sinner is justified before God, and it is well for the sinner, as soon as possible after he has turned to the Lord, to be made acquainted with this subject.Â The epistle opens with some very grand utterances about the eternal purpose and foreknowledge of God respecting Christ and his work of redemption, and also respecting the call of the Gentiles to be partakers with God's ancient people in his grace. This part closes with the third chapter, and Paul's prayer for the brethren addressed, which closes this chapter, is one of the most impressive passages in all his writings.