

## "ROMANS: AN INTRODUCTION"

(Thomas R. Schreiner)

The influence of Romans in the history of the church is remarkable. Augustine's understanding of grace was mined especially from Romans, though there were other sources as well. Martin Luther's entrance into the gates of paradise came as it dawned on him what Paul meant by the righteousness of God. The Reformation that swept through Europe and turned the Western world upside down was certainly shaped by the message of Romans. Then in the early part of the twentieth century, Karl Barth's commentary on Romans, as he noted, pulled on a bell that rang throughout the theological landscape and called into question the theological liberalism that was sweeping through the Western world.

No one seriously doubts Pauline authorship, and we know that Paul wrote the letter when he was in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3), and it should probably be dated in AD 55 or 56. In the past some scholars claimed that Romans was a treatise, a complete and full presentation of Paul's theology. Certainly Romans is a fuller exposition of Paul's theology than any other letter and is the most important Pauline letter for understanding his theology. Still, some important themes in his theology remain undeveloped in the letter. For instance, Ephesians represents a fuller exposition of the role of the church than we find in Romans or any other Pauline letter. Along the same lines, 1 Corinthians 12-14 says far more about spiritual gifts than we learn in Romans 12:4-8. Eschatology permeates Paul's theology and plays a critical role in Romans, but we see nothing like the extended reflections on Jesus's return that we find in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Christology isn't neglected in Romans, and we see an important Christological confession at the inception of the letter (1:3-4), and yet virtually all would agree that we lack the depth of Christology found in Philippians 2:6-11 or Colossians 1:15-20. Other areas of Paul's theology could be explored, but it is clear that Romans isn't a comprehensive unfolding of Paul's thought.

We need to ask why Paul includes the subjects addressed in Romans. Is there an explanation that helps us understand every part of the letter? What strikes careful readers is the focus on issues pertaining to Jews and gentiles. Paul speaks of the Jew first and also the Greek (Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10). The sins of gentiles are revealed (1:19-32) but also the sins of the Jews (2:1-29). When it comes to righteousness by faith, one of the central affirmations is that both Jews and gentiles are justified in the same way (3:29-30; 4:9-16), and Paul emphasizes that both Jews and gentiles are children of Abraham (4:17-25). In addition, the letter often



addresses the matter of the Mosaic law, which is a vital issue for Jew-gentile relations. Jews were apt to think that the law restrains sin, but Paul argues the opposite; the law doesn't damp down sin but exacerbates it (5:20; 6:14-15; 7:1-25). What changes people is God's grace in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit (6:1-23; 7:6; 8:1-39). Nowhere else in his letters is there an extended reflection of God's promises to Israel, and in chapters 9-11 Paul explains how the destiny of Israel relates to the inclusion of the gentiles. Then in 14:1-15:13 the matter of clean and unclean foods comes to the forefront, and the weak were primarily Jews who believed that the purity laws regarding food were still important, while the strong were mainly gentiles who believed that they were free to eat any foods.

The Jew-gentile character of the letter helps us understand the purpose of Romans. It is likely that divisions plagued Jews and gentiles in the churches (cf. 14:1-15:13). Furthermore, Paul himself was a polarizing figure, especially among Jews and even Jewish Christians, as Acts 21:20-25 attests. Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be the launching pad for his mission to Spain, but they could hardly function as his base if they were divided over the role of the law, particularly when that was the very issue that raised concerns about Paul. Paul, then, in the letter gives a full explanation of his view of the law and the place of Israel and gentiles in God's plan. His aim was that they would embrace the gospel he proclaimed and support him as he took that same gospel to Spain.