

Romans

An Interpretation Bible Commentary

SUSAN G. EASTMAN

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"Romans is an enactment in writing of Paul's desire 'to preach the gospel also to those who are in Rome' (Rom. 1:15). Susan Eastman's commentary on this letter attends to and participates in this proclamation. At once historically informed, theologically engaged, and

pastorally wise, this reading of Romans hears Paul's declaration of the gospel, joins the apostle in the apocalypse of both human bondage and divine mercy, and gives the reader this same good news so that they can speak again (and again) 'the gospel of [God's] Son' that is 'the power of God unto salvation'" (1:9, 16).

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"Few contemporary Pauline scholars can match Eastman's breathtaking range. In this volume of a much-loved (and now reimagined) series, her unique combination of historical and literary insight, theological vision, and pastoral sensitivity are all on display in her dynamic reading of Romans. Preachers, teachers, scholars, and students are all in Eastman's debt for this fresh encounter with the scope and power of Paul's gospel."

—Jamie Davies, Tutor in New Testament and Director
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SERIES FOREWORD

The work of biblical interpretation is ever-changing because the art of reading and understanding is profoundly shaped by the lives of interpreters and their communities. The original Interpretation series was designed to meet the needs of clergy, teachers, and students as a resource that integrates literary, historical, theological, and pastoral insights. The decision to extend and reframe that series as the Interpretation Bible Commentary reflects awareness of the vast historical, cultural, and ecclesial changes that have occurred since the last volume of the previous series was published in 2005. These new volumes reflect the major changes in interpretative strategies as well as a keen awareness of a dramatically changing contemporary context.

Prominent among the significant changes in the interpretive landscape is the expanded range of voices in biblical scholarship. Biblical interpretation has always been a diverse, vibrant undertaking, but that breadth has not been reflected in publications. The diversity of contributors in this renewed series reflects respect and appreciation for a broad array of witnesses.

The primary focus of the Interpretation Bible Commentary series remains unchanged from its predecessor: to invite its readers into the lively work of careful biblical interpretation for the purpose of faithful exposition. Preachers and teachers seeking reflective guidance from the biblical texts will find these volumes an illuminating and highly accessible resource. This Interpretation Bible Commentary series will tend to the needs of its twenty-first-century audience while maintaining the priorities of its creators. The words of the original editors—James Mays, Patrick Miller, and Paul Achtemeier—still ring true: “What is in mind is the work of an interpreter who brings theological and pastoral sensitivity to the task and creates an interpretation which does not stop short with judgments about the text but is engaged in a dialogue of seeing and hearing with it as a contemporary believer.”

Emphasizing both sound critical exegesis and strong theological sensibilities, these new volumes employ innovative approaches that allow for fresh readings of biblical texts, including difficult passages.

The series empowers readers to engage God's creation and our place in it with fresh eyes. Through their engagement with Scripture, the commentaries illumine our relationship with God, each other, and creation so that readers are propelled with new understanding and energy for fulfilling God's claims upon us in our rapidly changing global context.

Using several interpretive methodologies that are appropriate for the varying biblical texts, these volumes promise a compelling interpretation for the church and world today. Each exposition will situate the respective biblical books historically, theologically, literarily, and socially, providing a rich resource for unleashing the homiletical and formational potential of the text.

The text on which the commentary is based is the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue). Because this translation is widely available, the printing of a text in the commentary itself is unnecessary. Each commentary is divided into sections appropriate to the particular book. Instead of offering a verse-by-verse interpretation, the commentary deals with passages as a whole. Thematic topics that are especially pertinent or have great bearing on the biblical book are addressed in excursions. A "For Further Reading" section provides resources that are instructive for broadening the reader's hermeneutical horizons and diversifying the reader's understanding of how to approach the text.

The writers and editors hope these volumes will explain and apply the meaning and significance of the biblical texts while addressing key contemporary issues. The Interpretation Bible Commentary series is intended to draw the reader into an interpretative community where, collegially, reader and interpreter can more fruitfully engage these ancient texts for present living.

The Editors

PREFACE

The late, marvelous Johannine scholar Moody Smith once told me that he had been “marinating in the Gospel of John” for forty years and was looking forward to reading the rest of the New Testament after he retired. I have been marinating in Romans for a considerable time and while I am not yet pickled, perhaps I am well-seasoned by soaking up Paul’s gospel preaching. Like fine wine, Paul’s good news ages well. For this reason, writing this commentary has been a tremendous gift to me, and I am profoundly grateful to the editorial board of Westminster John Knox for inviting me to participate in the new edition of the Interpretation commentary series. Completion of this work has been delayed by many events, both personal and professional. Throughout, the series editors Brian Blount and Beverly Gaventa have been unfailingly gracious and supportive. I also deeply appreciate the cordial and collaborative editorial work of Julie Mullins and Dan Braden, and the meticulous copyediting by Tina Noll, which has saved me from many errors. Any mistakes that remain are my own.

A brief word about my approach to this commentary may be helpful. Because it is written primarily for pastors and laypeople, it is heavy on pastoral and theological reflections, and relatively light on scholarly disputes about Romans. Neither space nor formatting guidelines allow for engagement with different interpretations, nor—alas!—for adequately crediting the enormous debt I owe to others’ scholarly work. Works explicitly cited are noted in parentheses in the main text, along with sources of some key arguments. For further information, the reader may consult the recommendations for further research, along with the list of works cited, in the bibliography.

The commentary is based the NRSVue translation of Romans, with reference to the Greek. For the sake of simplicity, I have opted to use the historically anachronistic but familiar term “Christians” as well as “believers” to refer to Paul’s audience, whom he names variously as “saints,” “brothers and sisters,” “in Christ,” “baptized,” and not least, “beloved.” Throughout, I have kept my focus on the

goals of preaching and pastoring in light of Paul's gospel; excursions at the end of each section offer theological reflections and examples designed for preachers.

Authors frequently acknowledge their "debts" to others in the writing of their books; here I name some of the many "gifts" I have received, without which it would have been impossible to complete the manuscript. I say "gifts" because they far surpass any prior worth on my part, and yet they also contributed to my growth as a teacher and scholar. When I began work on this book, I was teaching at Duke University Divinity School, where one of my great joys was studying Romans with bright, engaged students; I remain grateful for that gift. A preretirement sabbatical in 2022 allowed me to spend a winter at the Collegetown Institute in Collegetown, Minnesota. Special thanks are due to the institute for their extraordinary welcome in the middle of a Minnesota winter, and for the gift of time, space, beauty, and encouragement I received there. The bulk of the commentary first draft was written during that time.

Now that I am retired, I am thankful also for the opportunity to teach a class on Romans at my local church, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where the enthusiasm of the participants reminds me that Romans is always provocative and always a word in season for all people in all walks of life, not just clergy and academics.

Because the Interpretation commentary series offers a welcome opportunity to integrate exegesis with theological and pastoral reflection, this commentary has taken shape in both academic and pastoral contexts, and especially in the everyday struggles and joys of life. People from many walks of life have contributed to it, both directly in conversation and indirectly through the gift of their friendship and experience. There are far too many to name, but here I particularly thank friends and colleagues who have taught me much about the power and love of God. They comprise a circle of grace and trust, ever shifting and widening, and extending beyond death. That circle includes but is not limited to Alexandra Brown, Andrew Grove, Angela Eastman, Ann Jervis, Beverly Gaventa, Chris Anderson, David and Helen Marshall, Danny, Lia, and Elladan An, Dorothea Bertschmann, Dustin and Sherri Ellington, Eddie Eastman†, Ellen Davis, Fleming Rutledge, Jamie Davies, John Barclay, Jono Linebaugh, Lacey Warner, Liz Dowling-Sendor, Lou and Dorothy

Martyn†, Marcia Pally, Marj Oines, Phoebe Potter, Richard Hays†, Robert Fruehwirth, Shelly Matthews, Susan Smith, Thea Portier-Young, and many others.

As ever, my gratitude to and for my family knows no bounds: for Angela, Danny, Lia, and Elladan, and in memory of Eddie. Your love fills my life with warmth, joy, and laughter. The adventure continues.

Finally, this commentary is dedicated to Beverly Gaventa, with immense gratitude for her deep friendship and generous collegiality over many years.

Introduction

When I regularly hear the epistles of the blessed Paul read . . . I rejoice and enjoy the heavenly trumpet, and I am aroused and warmed by desire. I recognize the voice I love; I almost feel his presence and see him speaking.

—John Chrysostom, Argumentum

HOW TO READ ROMANS

It is appropriate to begin this commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans with a quotation from John Chrysostom, the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople who was famous for his preaching (“Chrysostom” means “golden mouth” in Greek). The present commentary is written with preaching in mind; our foremost concern is the gospel proclamation we hear in Romans and its effects on Paul’s original listeners, on us, and on those with whom we minister. Chrysostom reflects on the effects of Paul’s letters on him—what the letters *do to* him. Paul’s words are “the heavenly trumpet”—they are a clarion call, an awakening, an impetus to action. To hear them is an event that awakens desire, warms the heart, and fires up the will. His words communicate Paul’s voice, a voice that Chrysostom has learned to love; indeed, they almost make Paul present in the flesh. They speak as a living voice, not dead letters.

Similarly, the goal of the present commentary is to enliven our imaginations and clarify our understanding so that, like Chrysostom, we also hear the “heavenly trumpet” when we hear and read Romans. Like Jews who dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah, the annual festival celebrating the reading of the entire Torah cycle, we aim to dance with this text as with a beloved partner. In Marilynne Robinson’s classic novel, *Gilead*, the main character is an elderly

pastor named John Ames; the book unfolds as his letter to his son. In one scene, Ames recounts waltzing alone in his study; he ponders the possibility of dying of a heart attack while he is dancing and concludes that he would like to die with a book in his hand. He meditates on possible books: “Donne, or Herbert, or Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*, or Calvin’s *Institutes*, Vol. 1” (Robinson 2004, 115). For Ames, these are books to live with and die with, books that should be commended even in death. How much more then is Paul’s own Letter to the Romans just such a book, for life and in death.

So as we read through the Epistle to the Romans, we will listen for the living voice of Paul, warming our hearts and firing our wills, not simply instructing the Roman Christians or introducing himself but announcing and rendering the presence of the God who keeps promises, who remains faithful to the historic people of Israel, and who in Jesus Christ has acted decisively on behalf of all humanity. We will watch for the Lord who conquers sin and death, who frees humanity for service to God and one another, and who continues to live and move among believers and into the world with transforming power. Our goal is not a kind of analysis that objectifies the body of the text, leaving it dissected and dying on the operating table, but rather a dynamic encounter with the living Lord of the gospel, who liberates the listener from delusions and compulsions into the life that really is life.

Along the way, we will see and hear Paul’s own struggles and passions as much as possible in the context of his time, but also speaking to ours. Such understanding requires work that draws fruitfully on scholarly historical and literary analysis. On the one hand, because the Letter to the Romans is so familiar and has such a long and complex history of interpretation, it is easy to be deaf to the trumpet, to miss the good news. On the other hand, we are reading mail from roughly two thousand years ago, from a time and place radically different from today. To read this text, as to read all ancient texts, is an exercise in cross-cultural communication, which requires bracketing our own cultural assumptions and attending with humility and care to a voice speaking out of a very different social world. Thus learning about the situation of Christians in Rome in the first century and pondering Paul’s own missionary challenges will inform our imaginative engagement with the text and aid in the practice of making analogies to contemporary situations and challenges.

WHY DID PAUL WRITE ROMANS?

Commentaries on Paul's Letter to the Romans frequently begin with this question, perhaps because the answer is anything but clear. Why did Paul write a lengthy and ultimately very influential "letter" to a fledgling community of believers, most of whom he had never met, in a city to which he had never been? What was his purpose? What was his motivation? Why?

"Why" is a question worth asking because it makes us pay close attention to the content and shape of Romans, and to its author and his addressees, who were real people in difficult and complicated circumstances that may in turn make us reflect on our own situations as Paul's listeners today. I will turn to some theories about the purposes of Romans shortly. But first it is worth noting that why is a query that leads into mystery: we rarely know fully why we ourselves do anything, let alone why someone else does. Why did I send that email that I now regret? Why did you say yes to that job, or no to that person? Why did John Donne write poetry? Why did Toni Morrison write *Beloved*? There may be answers to these questions, but the answers lead to more questions. Why? can be interrogated only through an examination of history and plans and motives that goes ever deeper into the mystery of human intention and agency, and within and beyond those human intentions, into the mystery of God's purposes and actions. Paul surely leads his listeners on a journey into the mystery of God's power and grace. Beyond that mystery, the why of Romans is a question that will never be answered fully, just as the effects of this remarkable document continue across millennia and across cultural variations up to the present day.

Nonetheless, asking the question is worthwhile because it mandates careful attention to the structure and narrative details of the letter. Such attention yields *three key observations*. *First*, Romans begins and ends as a letter, with a lengthy personal introduction at the beginning and lengthy personal greetings to people in Rome at the end. In between is a tripartite exposition of the good news of Jesus Christ as the powerful revelation of God's righteousness: through the deliverance of all humanity from sin and death (chaps. 1–8), through God's mercy for Israel and the gentiles (chaps. 9–11), and through the shared fellowship of Jewish and gentile believers in Rome (chaps. 12–15).

Second, toward the end of the letter Paul tells the Romans of his upcoming travel plans: first to Jerusalem, to take funds from his gentile churches to the impoverished community of Jewish believers in the mother city (15:22–32); after that, to Spain by way of Rome, to continue his evangelistic mission to the known world (15:24, 28–29). Both planned trips are fraught with danger, and Paul particularly asks for prayers that the trip to Jerusalem will be peaceful and his financial gift will be accepted (15:30–31). He also hints that he hopes to receive financial support from the Roman churches when he visits there, to speed him on his way to Spain (15:24). Therefore on one level it is likely that he writes to the church in Rome to introduce himself and his gospel prior to coming for a visit, particularly if he hopes his hosts will give him shelter and food as well as support for his further mission to Spain.

These observations drawn from the letter's closing chapters offer clues as to some of Paul's goals in this lengthy missive to the churches in Rome. But they do not fully explain the extensive theological discourse that forms the bulk of the document, nor the distinctive features of that discourse in comparison with his other letters. For that we turn to the *third* observation, which will provide the guiding principle for this commentary's approach to Romans. Although Paul has not been to Rome, he has heard of their faith, for which he praises them (1:8; 15:14). Yet he wants to share the gospel with them and "reap some harvest among" them, as if they still need to hear the good news about Jesus, or at least Paul's version of that news (1:8–15). In fact, early in the letter, Paul's most emphatic statement of his reason for writing is this: "I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened" (1:11). Shortly thereafter, he declares his "eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (1:15). The concluding doxology reiterates Paul's goal of strengthening his listeners through gospel proclamation: "Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (16:25). This doxology provides a guide to reading the letter beyond the situation in Rome, leading even up to the present day: Paul's gospel proclamation is intended to "strengthen" his audience; the Greek word means "to set on a solid foundation." Paul wants to establish his listeners firmly in the faith, so that they will grow ever more deeply into "the obedience of faith" (1:5; 16:26). His pastoral goal

will also guide our approach to Romans, as we seek to discern the varied ways Paul's message functions to strengthen his listeners' trust in God. As we shall see, that proclamation centers around the good news of God's Son in the flesh (1:3; 8:3; 9:5), whose person and work enact God's power to save and reveal God's righteousness. Paul preaches Christ's solidarity with all humanity, in his saving death and resurrection, as the power of God for salvation for both Jews and gentiles.

To hear this message afresh, we will sit with the Roman Christians and listen as the letter unfolds. But in order to listen imaginatively to the letter together with its first auditors, we need to attend to the particular situation of the churches in Rome, especially regarding the relationship between Jews and gentiles.

THE CHURCHES IN ROME

Jewish and Gentile Believers

Romans is the only extant letter Paul wrote to a church that he did not establish. Indeed, we do not know how the churches in Rome began; we can only make somewhat educated guesses. What we do know is that by the time Paul wrote Romans, probably from Corinth around 56–57 CE, there were numerous house churches in the city of Rome and the neighboring district of Puteoli (Acts 28:13–15). The main trade route into Rome from the east ran through Puteoli, and parts of both Rome and Puteoli had substantial Jewish populations. Many new religious cults made their way to Rome via the eastern trade routes; perhaps Christianity was yet another. It seems likely that Christian traders, perhaps Jewish followers of Jesus, first brought the fledgling faith to Rome. Initially, at least, it would have been seen as Jewish and taken hold among members of the synagogues, perhaps among gentile God-fearers as well as Jews. Jewish followers of Jesus, most notably Prisca and Aquila, are among the numerous Roman believers whom Paul greets by name near the end of the letter (16:3; see commentary).

In 41 CE the emperor Claudius forbade Jews to hold public meetings, presumably because they were causing public disturbances of some sort. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, in roughly

49 CE Claudius issued an edict expelling some Jews from the city: “Claudius expelled from Rome the Jews constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” (*Claud.* 25). Later in Rome Christians were called by the name “Chrestians” (Tertullian, *Apol.* 3; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44). According to Acts 18:2 the Claudian expulsion included “a Jew named Aquila . . . [and] his wife Priscilla,” who ended up in Corinth, where they welcomed Paul on his first journey there. Possibly Priscilla (also called Prisca) and her husband Aquila were leaders among the Jewish believers in Rome and became leaders among the Christians in Corinth until they returned to Rome, presumably after Nero came to power in 54 CE.

The expulsion of at least some of the Jewish believers from Rome in 49 CE may have led to a gradual split between the Jewish synagogue and the new followers of Jesus, although this is speculation. What is clear is that by the time Paul writes Romans, the churches have become predominantly gentile, disconnected from the synagogues; by the time of Nero’s persecutions of Christians in 64 CE, the Roman authorities distinguish between Jews and Christians. What has happened in Roman churches that were once primarily composed of Jewish Christians? Clues in Romans hint at gentile arrogance toward Jews (11:13–21) and at tensions between those who practice observance of Sabbath and kosher food laws and those who do not (14:5–6). These clues may signify the existence of Roman house churches that are primarily gentile but also include a minority population of Jewish adherents of Jesus, a proposal that is strengthened by the existence of Jewish names in the long list of people whom Paul greets at the end of the letter (16:1–23).

Writing to churches with a complex and perhaps painful recent history, Paul instructs the Roman Christians on issues in their faith and fellowship. In this, he is embarking on a delicate and potentially offensive venture, instructing those over whom he has no established teaching authority. Perhaps for this reason he emphasizes his long-standing desire to meet the Christians in Rome (1:13; 15:23) and his personal relationships with many of them (16:3–15). Clearly Paul longs to strengthen Christian fellowship in which Jew and gentile together “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:6). Indeed, this is the goal and crowning glory of the gospel that Paul preaches and, as such, essential to our understanding of the letter.

Wealth and Poverty

Clues in *Romans* itself as well as *Acts* imply that the Christians in Rome were not generally of the upper classes. Archaeological evidence suggests that the majority of Christians were located in the poorest areas of the city, where immigrants settled—Trastevere and Porta Capena. These areas were densely populated, with abysmal living conditions in crowded five-story tenements. Thus most Roman believers were likely quite poor and of low status. Indeed, we know that many Christians were crucified during the intense persecution by Nero in 64 CE. It was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen, since this form of execution was reserved for enslaved persons and criminals; thus the implication is that many of the Roman Christians were not Roman citizens, and likely were or had been enslaved.

Rome was a highly stratified society, and Paul is notable in exhorting his listeners to an unusual mutuality between upper and lower classes (*Rom* 12:3–13). Evidently some members of the Roman house churches had enough means to share with their neighbors in Christ (12:8, 13). The fact that Paul thinks it necessary to encourage his listeners to such generosity, even when he has not yet met them and might appear presumptuous, indicates the degree to which he thinks Christian fellowship should be a truly radical inversion of Roman social norms. We have further evidence of fluid and diverse social status in the Roman congregations from the letter of 1 Clement, written late in the first century. Clement writes that many Roman Christians sold themselves into slavery so that the money thus gained could be used to feed fellow impoverished believers. This happened after Paul wrote *Romans*, of course, and likely after Paul himself perished in Nero's persecution. But it evidences the generally poor, lower-class, noncitizen makeup of most of the Roman Christian communities, as well as the strong solidarity among at least some Roman believers.

PAUL'S WRITING STYLE: GRECO-ROMAN RHETORIC AND PROPHETIC SPEECH

As this commentary will focus on the potential effects of the letter on its original listeners and on readers today, it will be important to

pay close attention to Paul's language. In a variety of ways, Paul takes his audience on an experiential journey of discovery, even as that journey also discloses the experiences of the early Christians. Paul's rhetoric operates on many levels, from appeals to logic to appeals to emotion and experience. Insofar as the letter both makes its author present to his listeners and communicates a gospel gift to strengthen them, it must speak in a holistic way to the Roman house churches, addressing their minds, hearts, and bodily interactions with each other and their cultural context. Paul uses a number of rhetorical devices toward this end.

At key points, Paul uses the style of the *diatribe*, a lively pattern of questions and answers that involves the audience in the thought progression of the text. Sometimes he speaks directly to an imagined conversation partner by using the second-person singular pronoun "you" (2:1–5, 17–27; 14:4, 10); sometimes his argument progresses through a series of questions and answers that anticipate objections to his message. For contemporary readers of Paul, this style of writing has pitfalls, as it is easy to ascribe to Paul the very views against which he is arguing. Thus it is crucial to read his complex discourses all the way through, to avoid the danger of taking any verse or verses out of context. His first-century Roman audience, however, would recognize his diatribe style as a familiar way of speaking in contemporary Greco-Roman rhetoric, so that they could enjoy the repartee of question and answer as if watching a play. Furthermore, such interaction between speakers in the text also invites the listeners to see themselves in the performance and to examine their own lives. This stylistic device is particularly prominent when Paul challenges human judgmentalism and stereotyping (2:1–3:9; 14:1–4, 10–12) and when he considers Israel's unique place in God's salvation (9:1–11:36).

Paul also involves his listeners by employing performative first-person speech. Usually when Paul says "I" he simply means "I, Paul" (1:1, 8–15; 7:1; 8:18; 9:1; 10:2, 18, 19; 11:1, 11, 13, 15; 12:1, 3; 14:8, 14–32; 16:1, 17, 19). But the apostle also speaks with a performative "I" in 7:7–25, which is more like the "I" of the psalms, who invites the listeners into the experience of the psalmist. Scholars debate whether this should be categorized as speech-in-character, a technical device in Greco-Roman rhetoric, but the important point is that Paul's language draws his hearers into the experience of the speaker.

In addition to employing stylistic devices from Greco-Roman rhetoric, Paul draws extensively on the language, narratives, and motifs of Israel's Scripture. He quotes explicitly and allusively from the Psalms and the Prophets (particularly Isaiah and Hosea) as well as from Genesis and Deuteronomy. This reliance on Scripture is especially evident in regard to God's foundational calling of Israel and God's self-disclosure throughout the history of Israel (chaps. 9–11). Paul quotes from the Greek translation of Israel's Scripture, the Septuagint (LXX), which occasionally varies from the Hebrew text.

THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL THEMES

In such a long, complex, and intensely studied document as Romans, there are sure to be a variety of opinions on the primary theological themes of the letter. A lengthy tradition of interpretation focuses on the first eight chapters as setting forth Paul's distinctive gospel of grace. Within those chapters, some have found the center of gravity in chapters 1–4, with an emphasis on human culpability for sin and Christ's atoning sacrifice. Others point to chapters 5–8, where the themes of freedom from sin and new life in Christ dominate Paul's exposition of the gospel. In the wake of the Holocaust, however, many scholars focus on chapters 9–11, where Paul affirms the continued place of Israel in God's salvation. Then again, close attention to the potential struggles in the Roman house churches, which may have involved not only conflict regarding Jewish and gentile practices, but also differences between wealthy and poor believers, leads some to find the climax of the letter in 15:7: "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you."

These debates about the theological center of Romans highlight its richness and enduring relevance. Each section of the letter contributes to Paul's gospel proclamation, and none of them could be omitted without grievously impoverishing the message. But what ties them together? This commentary argues that the good news of Jesus Christ as God's Son in the flesh, in solidarity with both Jews and gentiles, is the theme of the letter; its theological heartbeat is the revelation of God's righteousness, which is displayed above all in God's abundant, overflowing grace toward all creation.

The Good News of Jesus Christ, Incarnate, Crucified, Raised

Paul begins his letter by introducing himself only in relationship to the gospel. This gospel is the theme of the letter. It is God's gospel, God's good news, authored and enacted by God. The content of this news is God's Son, the incarnate, resurrected Lord. Twice Paul describes Jesus as God's Son in the flesh: first in 1:3–4, as born of David's seed according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness; second, in 8:3, as sent by God in the likeness of sin-owned flesh, therein becoming the place where God condemned sin in the flesh. Again, in 9:5, Paul says that from the Jews according to the flesh comes the Christ according to the flesh. Thus, the identity and work of Jesus Christ in the flesh frame Romans 1–8 and introduce Romans 9–11. This Christ, in fleshly solidarity with both Jews and gentiles under sin's power, is the content of Paul's gospel proclamation in the first section of the letter and grounds his vision for God's redemption of both Israel and the gentiles in chapters 9–11. In Romans 12–15, it is the indwelling Spirit of Christ, who is equally the indwelling Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, who dwells among those in Christ, generating patterns of human interaction characterized by unmerited gifts and mutual welcome. This is the gospel that Paul longs to share in person with the Roman churches, and indeed proclaims in his lengthy letter to them.

The Revelation of God's Righteousness

In 1:16–17 Paul expands further on the character of the gospel as God's power for salvation, for in it God is apocalyptically revealing God's righteousness. God's saving power and God's righteousness are revealed in and enacted by God's action in Christ. Later Paul will speak of God's righteousness, truthfulness, and faithfulness as intertwined divine attributes of the God who entrusted God's words to Israel (3:1–7). As he thinks through the revelation of God in Israel's calling, Paul highlights God's power to harden hearts and to have mercy, and ends with praise to God as the source of all that is. Just as light reveals its colors when it passes through a prism, so the divine abundance, righteousness, trustworthiness, and truthfulness revealed

in Israel's history come into sharpest focus through the prism of Christ's gracious self-giving for all humanity.

The Theological Heartbeat of the Gospel

The central doxology that concludes the first two sections of the letter's central discourse anticipates the ethical exhortations in the final section: "Who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (11:35–36). This revelation of God as the gracious giver to whom nothing can be repaid, the source of all creation, and the one who through Christ has gifted salvation to both Jew and gentile characterizes God's dealings with all humanity (chaps. 1–8 and 9–11) and grounds the community of Jewish and gentile believers who are instructed to extend to one another the gracious welcome that God has given them (chaps. 12–15). This divine gift is bound up in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in a pattern of solidarity and exchange between Christ and humanity.

In chapters 1–8 Paul highlights the commonality of Jew and gentile "under sin," and God's saving power enacted through Jesus as God's Son in solidarity with David's heirs (1:3) and with all humanity in the grip of sin and death (8:3). Revealing God's righteous will to save God's creation, this divine participation in the plight of derelict humanity enacts God's victory over sin and death and catalyzes a reciprocal participation in Christ by believers. In chapters 9–11 Paul further develops the interpersonal dynamics of this gift of grace through a pattern of solidarity and exchange in God's redemption of Jews and gentiles together: Jews and gentiles take turns as those who have been imprisoned in disobedience and must rely on God's undeserved mercy. In chapters 12–15, such interpersonal grace is displayed by the mutual giving and receiving that shape the character of fellowship in Christ, such that all may "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7). Along the way, Paul's understanding of sin and redemption discloses a picture of human beings as participants in larger relationships that shape them, and of sin as a deceptive and lethal enslaving power from which humanity is liberated by Christ.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER

Taken as a whole, the letter may be divided into the following broad outline:

The Opening of the Letter

1:1–15 Greetings and personal introduction

The Body of the Letter

Part 1: 1:16–8:39 The good news of liberation from sin and death

Part 2: 9:1–11:36 God's grace and mercy for both Jews and gentiles

Part 3: 12:1–15:13 Grace and mercy enacted in the new humanity
in Christ

The Conclusion of the Letter

15:14–16:27 Concluding travel plans and greetings

The opening and conclusion of Romans are what scholars call its “epistolary frame,” which simply means that they consist of greetings and information identifying Romans as a letter. The main body of the letter is Paul's tripartite proclamation of the gospel for both Jews and gentiles. The table of contents provides an overview of the main sections and subsections within this broad outline. Detailed analysis of the structure of each subsection will follow in the commentary.

The Opening of the Letter

Romans 1:1–15

Greetings and Purpose in Writing

Romans 1:1–15

Writing a letter to a church he has neither founded nor visited, Paul begins in an expected way: he introduces himself. But what quickly becomes clear is that this personal introduction is anything but routine. In Greco-Roman letters, greetings tended to be brief and to the point, whereas in Romans it takes Paul seven verses to get to his standard salutation: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Why such an extended introduction? The answer is that Paul cannot introduce himself without first introducing the God who has called and commissioned him and whose purpose henceforth guides Paul’s destiny. Paul’s identity is enfolded in the identity and action of God; he is co-constituted by the active presence of God in Christ.

After his lengthy introduction, Paul tells the Romans why he hopes to visit them. Thus this section of the letter may be divided into two subunits: introductions (1:1–7) and purpose in writing (1:8–15).

ROMANS 1:1–7 **Introducing the Main Characters** **in the Drama of Salvation**

1:1–2. Paul

Here is what the Roman readers first learn about Paul, in his own words (1:1): first, he is a *slave of Christ Jesus*. The NRSVue uses the

term “servant,” but the Greek word is slave (*doulos*). Paul is placing himself within the prophetic tradition of Israel: Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets also are called slaves of God (Josh 14:7; Judg 2:8; 2 Kgs 17:13, 23; Jer 7:25; 25:4). To be an enslaved person means that one’s body, thoughts, emotions, and relationships are all in the hands of the master, whose status in turn may—or may not—raise the status of the one enslaved. To be a slave of God is very high status indeed. But as Paul’s Roman audience knew very well, although some enslaved persons gained high status through their masters, many others had a degraded and brutally short life. Paul’s preferred designation of himself as a slave of Christ (cf. Phil 1:1) perhaps displays this paradox; he has immeasurable worth through belonging to Christ, yet in the eyes of society he is a nobody (cf. 1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 11:24–29). Already we have a hint of what the apostle will tell his Roman listeners later in the letter: they too are “slaves,” either of sin, which leads to death (6:6, 16–17, 20), or of God, who bestows life (6:16–17, 22). There is no place to stand or to live outside of this structure of belonging, which includes all human beings regardless of their social class.

Second, Paul is *called to be an apostle* (cf. 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1). Called by whom? we might ask. The answer is implicit in Paul’s immediate focus on God. Like the prophets, Paul has been called by God (Jer 1:5; Isa 49:1). In Galatians he also emphasizes this divine call to the exclusion of any other merely human calling or authorization (Gal 1:1, 11–12). Paul is uniquely authorized by God, and therefore so is the message that he preaches.

The word “apostle” means “one who is sent out.” For that reason, apostleship is a matter not so much of status or office, but of authorized activity in the service of God. Apostleship implicitly involves displacement from one’s point of origin, “getting on the road with Jesus.” That certainly is what Paul has done throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. Paul’s calling as an apostle has made him a migrant on land and sea, traversing much of the same territory that displaced victims of war and oppression travel today.

Third, Paul is *set apart for the gospel of God*. In Galatians 1:15 Paul names God as the one who “set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace”; here again Paul’s language echoes the call narratives of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5) and the Servant in Isaiah 49:1. To be “set apart” also has a cultic sense: the firstborn were to be “set apart”

for God (Exod 13:12), as were the firstfruits (Num 15:20) and the Levites in their divine service (Num 8:11). By using this terminology, Paul depicts himself as “consecrated” to God for the particular purpose of proclaiming God’s message of salvation. The phrase “the gospel of God” occurs elsewhere in Paul’s letters only at Romans 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; and 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9, and accords with the theocentric focus of Romans as a whole, in which the word “God” (*theos*) appears some 153 times. God is the main actor, the origin, and the author of the good news that Paul proclaims.

This good news fulfills the promises God made “through his prophets in the holy scriptures”—that is, through the sacred writings of Israel (1:2). Paul thus signals two aspects of the gospel that thread through the letter: the inseparable connection between Jesus Christ and God’s faithfulness to Israel, and the witness of Israel’s Scripture to Christ. This twofold connection grounds Paul’s first depiction of Jesus in the next two verses.

1:3–4. Jesus Christ, God’s Son and David’s Offspring

In 1:3–4, Paul introduces Jesus Christ as the protagonist of the good news: he is God’s Son (repeated in both verses), descended from the seed (*sperma*, not translated in NRSVue) of David according to the flesh, declared the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead; he is Jesus Christ our Lord. The activity of God, the Son, and the Spirit are bound into one; God is the origin of the good news, the content of that news is God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit witnesses to Christ’s divine identity through the resurrection.

Several aspects of this brief introduction of Jesus are unique to Romans, prompting some commentators to see here a quotation of a pre-Pauline creedal statement. Whether or not this is the case, Paul introduces Christ in distinctive ways that anticipate key themes in the rest of the letter: In no other undisputed letter does Paul mention David, but David appears three times in Romans—as Christ’s progenitor (1:3), as a quintessential sinner praising God for God’s mercy (4:6), and as a witness to the hardening of Israel (11:9). The terms “Christ (Messiah),” “son,” “seed,” and “David” suggest that recognized messianic texts lie behind this description of Jesus (2 Sam 22:51; Ps 18:50; 2 Sam 7:12–14; Isa 11:10), some of which Paul

cites explicitly in 15:9–12. Thus, right at the beginning of the letter, and again at the end, Paul emphasizes Jesus’s identity as Israel’s messiah, although he does not mention Israel by name until 9:6.

Paul’s choice of terms for signifying Christ’s Jewish identity is puzzling, however. Christ is descended from David “according to the flesh” (*kata sarka*) and declared Son of God “according to the Spirit [*kata pneuma*] of holiness.” The question is how to interpret “according to the flesh.” On the one hand, Paul uses the same phrase elsewhere in Romans to denote physical kinship, with reference to Abraham (4:1), Paul’s own Jewish kin (9:3), and Jesus as Israel’s Messiah (9:5). Surely that straightforward meaning applies here in 1:3 as well.

On the other hand, in the great majority of Paul’s uses of the term, “flesh” (*sarx*) has a pejorative sense as a sphere of embodied existence under the power of sin and death (7:5, 14, 18; 8:3–13). Furthermore, in 8:4–5, 12–13 Paul explicitly contrasts living “according to the flesh [*kata sarka*]” with living according to the Spirit or in the Spirit. In all these places, “flesh” signifies living in the realm or thrall of sin. Particularly striking is 8:3, where, as in 1:3, Paul names Christ as God’s Son in the flesh, but qualifies “flesh” as “sinful flesh”—that is, flesh in the grip of sin (see commentary). Is this association between flesh and sin also in view in Paul’s depiction of Christ as God’s Son in the flesh in 1:3? The question is not whether Jewish flesh per se is sinful; Paul never says this. The question is whether Christ’s fleshly solidarity with David’s physical descendants is encompassed in his fleshly solidarity with all humanity in the throes of sin and death. As the letter unfolds, it becomes clear that such is the case; indeed, David himself exemplifies the sinner who rejoices in God’s undeserved mercy (4:6–8).

Thus right from the start of the letter Paul affirms Jesus’s full humanity and historical particularity as a Jew and at the same time his divine identity, which is made known through his resurrection from the dead. These are events in time and space, not simply timeless truths. They enact God’s purposes and promises to Israel and God’s redemptive rule over all creation. God reigns specifically in human lives, beginning with Paul and the Roman believers, for whom Jesus Christ is not only “Son of God” but is for them personally, “our Lord.”

Within the action of God, the Spirit witnesses to the identity of Jesus, who is “declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness.” In 8:5–17, 23, 26–27, Paul has more to say about

the Spirit's role in the community's life. There he names the Spirit interchangeably as "the Spirit of Christ" and "the Spirit of God" (8:9, 14). Here in 1:4, uniquely in all his letters, he uses the term "the Spirit of holiness." "Spirit of holiness" may put stress on the sanctifying role of the Spirit; the parallel construction of "according to the flesh" (1:3) and "according to the Spirit" (1:4) certainly emphasizes both the human and divine aspects of Jesus's identity. Christ's resurrection from the dead is the linchpin in the revelation of his divine identity; the link between the life-giving Spirit and the resurrection anticipates the Spirit's role in 8:9–11.

1:5. Paul's Apostleship

Toward the end of a very long sentence, in 1:5 Paul returns to his own calling and expands it in three ways: "we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name." As in 1:1, Paul echoes Jeremiah 1:5 and Isaiah 49:1, 5–6, which extend the prophetic message to the nations (Gk., gentiles). There are other apostles, such as Peter, who have a calling to take the gospel to the Jews (Gal 2:7–8), but Paul understands his vocation as focused distinctively on gentiles (yet also anticipating the salvation of his Jewish kinsfolk; cf. 11:13–14).

Paul speaks in the first-person plural: "*We* have received grace and apostleship." Who is this "we"? At first glance one might think Paul is including the Roman Christians, but the next phrase excludes that possibility. Probably, as in his other letters, Paul includes his fellow missionaries, including Phoebe, the emissary who carried his letter to Rome (16:1–2), and others who send greetings along with Paul (16:21–23). Indeed, the earliest use of "apostle" in Paul's letters is plural, as Paul speaks of himself, Sylvanus, and Timothy as apostles of God's message for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:6). Paul views his vocation to the gentiles as God-given but not exclusive; he is not a go-it-alone missionary.

The goal of Paul's vocation is "the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name." In the context, "his name" refers to Christ's name. The letter's closing doxology repeats "the obedience of faith" (16:26). Through joining "obedience" and "faith," Paul signals from the beginning that faith, which is central to the gospel, issues in transformed lives. He is confident that the Roman

Christians themselves already know this: their “faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (1:8), just as their “obedience is known to all” (16:19). “Faith” and “obedience” thus bookend the entire letter, all within the context of the gift of grace (1:5).

The meaning and content of “faith” (*pistis*) will develop as the letter progresses, but already it clearly includes dispositions, actions, and relationships. To understand faith simply as mental assent to a set of propositions is inadequate at best, and in fact quite misleading. Rather, “faith” is a relational term widespread in Greco-Roman discourse, with the foundational meanings of “trust” and “trustworthiness” as desirable characteristics of every facet of human interaction: political, familial, financial, personal, and public. Trust and trustworthiness are the basic meanings of *pistis*. Such trust naturally involves knowledge and belief about that which one trusts, but it also involves emotions, motivations, and actions. This fulsome description of faith is crucial for understanding Paul’s varied uses of the term *pistis* throughout the letter. In this context, “the obedience of faith” does not mean that faith is reducible to obedience, nor that obedience and faith are the same thing, but rather that the obedience at which Paul aims expresses a relationship of trust.

1:6–7a. The Roman Believers

What of the Roman believers to whom Paul is writing? Who are they? In 1:6–7a Paul gives them a theological description in parallel with his own self-understanding, but also distinct from it. Like him, they are “called,” but not as apostles. Rather, their calling is twofold: they are “called to belong to Jesus Christ,” thereby sharing in Paul’s status as a slave of Jesus Christ (1:6), and they are “called to be saints” (1:7). As those who belong to Christ, they acknowledge Christ as their master and Lord. As saints (*hagiois*) they demonstrate the work of the Spirit of holiness (*hagiōsunēs*); that is, they are sanctified through Jesus Christ and set aside for his service. The Greek could equally well be translated simply as “called saints.” That is, sanctification is God’s doing; God has called them into a new life sanctified to God, and God’s calling creates their identity as saints. As the ambiguity of translation shows, however, such divine action does not preclude human action, but rather catalyzes it. The “obedience of faith” signifies living into that divinely gifted identity.

1:7b Greeting

Finally, Paul formally addresses the recipients of his letter: “To all God’s beloved in Rome.” He locates these saints very specifically in a dual identity that is easy to gloss over: first and most importantly, they are “God’s beloved.” As such, they can join with Paul in saying, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5). Such love is reciprocal, but clearly in Paul’s introductory greeting it first comes from God; it is the foundation of the Roman Christians’ life together. Secondly, they are “in Rome.” Their beloved life together does not float above the ground; it is acted out in a specific time and place, in the heart of the Roman Empire.

The very last clause of this exceedingly long sentence is the greeting Paul uses in all his letters: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7b; see 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1). Paul typically begins his letters by introducing himself, and sometimes his companions, and addressing his listeners as “saints.” But the length of the introduction in Romans is unique, perhaps because he has not yet been to the churches in Rome. The curtain rises on the drama of salvation and the major players take a bow, identified by their key attributes: God as the one who makes and keeps promises; Jesus Christ as the fleshly son of David and crucified and resurrected Son of God, who fulfills God’s promises in history; the Spirit of holiness as the one who witnesses to the identity of Jesus, and whose role in sanctification is highlighted here. But there are human players also; Paul, his fellow workers in the gospel, and the Roman believers are all caught up together into God’s drama of redemption.

ROMANS 1:8–15

Paul’s Purpose in Writing

1:8. Thanksgiving and Praise

As is his practice, Paul first thanks God for the letter’s recipients and affirms something about them (1 Cor 1:4–8; Phil 1:3–5; 1 Thess 1:2–10). In this case, since Paul has not yet been to Rome, he affirms

their reputation: “Your faith [*pistis*] is proclaimed throughout the world.” What is this “faith”? It would appear to be their trust in Christ, although this is not unambiguous. It could also be their trust in God, or even simply their trustworthiness. When Paul says, “Your *pistis* is proclaimed throughout the world,” he indicates that this faith is a way of life that is embodied, socially embedded, and therefore public. It is a faith that can be a source of encouragement to Paul, as also his faith will encourage the Romans (1:12), because to speak of someone’s trust and trustworthiness is immediately to speak of that person in relationship with others.

1:9–15. Hopes and Plans for Future Visit

Paul’s praise of the Romans’ faith introduces the catalyst for the letter, which is his eager yearning to visit the churches in Rome. Paul stresses the intensity of his interest in visiting the Roman believers in several ways: he prays for them “without ceasing” (v. 9); he longs to see them (v. 11); he has often intended to visit (v. 13); he declares his “eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (v. 15). In the very next sentence that is precisely what Paul begins to do, as he launches into an exposition of “the gospel” as “the power of God for salvation” (1:16 NRSV). If one thing is clear in the letter, it is that Paul’s purpose in writing is precisely to preach the gospel, in a particular way and for particular ends.

But why? If the faith of the Roman Christians already is proclaimed throughout the world, why do they need to hear the gospel from Paul? They already are saints, already called, already God’s beloved who belong to Christ. Paul obviously is aware of the incongruity of his desire to preach to fellow believers in established communities that he had no part in founding. If we back up to the previous verses, we gain a bit more clarity; Paul wants to strengthen the Roman Christians by giving them some spiritual gift (v. 11); he wants to reap some harvest (*karpos*, fruit) among them as among the rest of the gentiles (v. 13); in fact, he is under obligation to preach to everyone, across all cultural boundaries (v. 14). This language seems to put Paul in the position of benefactor and proclaimer, and the Romans in the position of needy recipients. He is keenly aware of the

power dynamics in such a benefactor relationship, and so he inserts a crucial self-correction: that is, “that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” Nonetheless, that language of mutuality does not stop him from proclaiming the gospel at length, as he understands it.

Does Paul think the Roman Christians have not received the true version of the good news? Perhaps. If so, he has a delicate task, to honor their faith and also to correct it. Or does Paul think his listeners have heard distortions of his own preaching and want to make sure they know what he really thinks before he gets there, to avoid any misunderstandings or surprises? Perhaps. The conversational diatribe style that he occasionally uses allows him to name potential objections to, and perhaps distortions of, his message, suggesting that sometimes he is correcting misrepresentations of his preaching (see, for example, 6:1–2). Possibly Paul is clarifying his argument in Galatians about the law of Moses. Possibly Paul wants to set forth his gospel as a testament of faith, in preparation for his upcoming trip to Jerusalem (15:30–32). Perhaps.

These are all possibilities relying on hints, not outright statements, in the letter itself. What is clear from Paul’s own opening greetings, however, is that he wants to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome even though he knows they are already believers. Toward the end of the letter, he reiterates that this is what he has done, again praising and affirming the Roman Christians: “I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles” (15:14–15). Paul’s gospel proclamation to the Romans is “by way of reminder,” reminding them of the good news they share together. And why not? Even when writing to churches he founded and knows well, Paul begins by “repreaching” the gospel in order to establish the common ground on which he and his listeners stand. This gospel is news that never gets old and always bears repeating. In fact, as we shall see in the spiral structure of chapters 1–8, Paul repeatedly rephrases the news of God’s action in Christ from different angles.

EXCURSUS

Reflections for Preaching and Teaching

The greetings and plans with which Paul begins his Letter to the Romans set out a series of intertwined introductions: Paul's introduction of himself, of the gospel he preaches, of the triune God who is the acting subject of that good news, and of the Roman Christians themselves, whom Paul narrates in terms of their belonging to Christ. Thus the letter begins by disclosing the identities of all the actors in the drama of salvation. These identities are bound together because Paul and his listeners cannot know who they are apart from the presence and redeeming action of God. They are who they are by virtue of being called and graced by God, albeit in different ways: Paul is called as an apostle; the Roman believers are called to be saints. Despite the differences in their calling, however, they are members of the same large household of God under the lordship of Christ. This shared belonging in Christ is the basis of the unity that Paul will enjoy throughout the letter, and it is the basis of all unity in the church to the present day.

At least four aspects of Paul's depiction of himself and the Roman Christians offer opportunities for preaching and teaching.

Solidarity with the Displaced

First, Paul is a displaced person, an itinerant preacher dependent on the hospitality of others. He sees his ministry as the culmination of Israel's prophetic tradition, but like many of the prophets, his vocation makes him a stranger among his own people. His calling entails crossing ethnic, social, and geographical boundaries, and he is convinced that such boundary crossing is at the heart of the gospel message, not least because it communicates the displaced Lord who crossed the chasm between God's righteousness and human dereliction. If Paul were a missionary today, he might well be walking with migrants around the Mediterranean or with the people at the southern border of the United States. We live in a time of massive global migrations, with all the confusion and suffering involved in profound displacement. Paul's peripatetic vocation requires solidarity with such displacement and, at the same time, a grounding of identity in God, deeper than any social or geographic

sources of the self. Traveling with Jesus means openness to displacement; it also means that wherever we find ourselves, God accompanies us on the road.

In Christ and in Rome

Second, Paul locates his listeners in a double way, as belonging to Jesus Christ and as living in Rome. Paul may be on the move, but the Roman Christians are not. Rather, their calling is to live out the obedience of faith on their home turf. This calling has its own challenges. Paul's answer to those challenges, in Romans as in all his letters, is to preach the gospel. It is good advice for preachers and pastors, even as it takes many different forms, because we, like the Roman Christians, live in a world that is deeply at odds with the good news of God in Christ. To be reoriented into the obedience of faith is to find oneself out of kilter with our social environment, whether or not we have actually moved.

In C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy, some of the main characters are heavenly messengers called Eldila. An Eldil can take any form, but sometimes it appears as a column of light. The odd thing is that when an Eldil is in a room, the floor appears slanted; everything seems off-kilter. This is because the Eldil's center of gravity is much stronger than that of Earth; the presence of the Eldil reveals how the earth itself is out of alignment with the grain of the universe. To have Christ as our center of gravity is to find ourselves out of sync with social mores and to have a radically reoriented vision of reality. But that reorientation of vision does not mandate or excuse escapism; just as the Roman believers are to live out their faith in their context, so are we called to live out God's decentering grace in ours, in ways that reveal just how off-kilter our own social and political contexts are.

Repreaching the Gospel

Such radical re-visioning does not happen easily, however; it requires constant reinforcement. It is not a one-time occurrence. For this reason, Paul repeats and reminds his listeners of the content of God's good news. He is convinced that repreaching this gospel is the way he can strengthen his listeners for the tough realities of belonging to Christ as Lord amid complex and often fearful social conditions. In the rest of the letter, we will see what such "strengthening" looks like. Paul's hope

encourages teachers and preachers to preach the gospel day in and day out; Paul never takes it for granted that his listeners know the basics of the faith, nor should we.

At the same time, Paul uses the language of giving and receiving: “that I may share with you some spiritual gift . . . that we may be mutually encouraged . . . that I may reap some harvest among you.” This language of giving and receiving suggests a two-way relationship between pastor and people that is crucial for the strengthening of the faith through gospel preaching. Paul displays and thereby encourages a combination of pastoral authority and vulnerable sharing of his own need to receive from, as well as give to, his listeners. Such acknowledgment of reciprocity may serve to encourage mutuality in churches today, without abdicating the responsibility of authoritative proclamation of the gospel message. It is at the least a matter of building trust and mutual respect and winning the right to be heard.

The Witness of Scripture

Finally, writing primarily to gentile Christians, Paul immediately reminds them that the good news they have received was promised by God in the “holy scriptures.” Throughout Romans, Paul shows us how Israel’s sacred writings testify to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and thereby encourages us to do the same. Christianity is not a cut-flower religion but the deep-rooted revelation of the Lord of all time and all creation, who acts in and through the particularities of history. There has always been a temptation within Christian preaching to neglect the Judaism of Jesus and Paul, whether from a desire to make the message simpler and more “relevant” or from outright anti-Judaism, but to do so renders Romans unintelligible. As the letter unfolds, it becomes clear that there is no good news without God’s enduring faithfulness to the promises to Israel—there is no salvation without the Jews. Nor can gentile Christians know who they are apart from God’s dealings with Israel: rather, drawing on Israel’s Scriptures to illuminate the meaning of faith (Rom 4), the identity of Jesus as the second Adam (Rom 5), and the faithfulness of God (Rom 9–11), Paul gives us new ways to narrate who we are in the midst of our shared life in the present day.
