

*“Welcome One Another
Just as Christ Has Welcomed You”*

Diocese of West Texas, Fall 2009

Introduction to Paul’s Letter to the Romans

“Our churches are in an uproar! Our members are at each other’s throats over conflicting interpretations of scripture! We can’t even celebrate the Lord’s Supper together because of our disputes and disagreements!”

Sound familiar? A typical day in the life of the Anglican Communion? It appears that this may have been the state of the churches in Rome when Paul wrote his influential letter to them in the late 50s of the first century. In those early decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus, local churches included both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. As a result, they often struggled painfully with how to live together peacefully. Then, as now, they were concerned about how their disputes over faithful practice undermined their unity in Christ. Paul’s letter addresses this and other important concerns about Christian living and believing.

Bishop Lillibridge has invited us this year to read and study Paul’s influential letter to the Romans. This letter has dramatically influenced the course of history for over two thousand years. As Bishop Lillibridge recently pointed out in the May/June 2009 issue of Church News, Romans has changed the minds and the lives of Christian leaders at important turning points over the past 2000 years. Today, we find ourselves at yet another important turning point for the church at the start of this new millennium. We offer this study of Romans with the hope that our minds also may be renewed and our lives together faithfully transformed.

The importance of Romans throughout the history of Christianity presents us, as modern readers, with a challenge. According to New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson:

“[t]he history of theological interpretation [of Romans] has obscured Paul’s meaning with layer after layer of subsequent significance discovered or imposed on Paul’s composition. Present-day readers find it difficult to cut through these layers in order to encounter what Paul himself wrote (Johnson, 2).”

An Introduction to this Particular Study of Romans

Our goal in this study is to enable us to read and study Paul’s letter in ways that are fresh and open to new possibilities for our lives. Johnson suggests that “[f]or this to happen, the reader should be willing to suspend notions of what Paul ‘must have been saying’ and to exercise a certain amount of historical imagination (Johnson, 2).” To accomplish this we will try to experience the letter as those first Christians in Rome would have heard it. Instead of assuming we already know the meaning of the letter or a particular passage, we will try to discover its many layers of meaning as we encounter Paul’s unfolding argument through a sequential reading of Romans. As a sustained argument from start to finish, Romans requires us to read closely and pay attention to particular words and phrases that appear at important points throughout the letter and the argument.

This study arose out of our conversations about Romans over the last four years, as we have taught together and led groups of laity in discernment of God’s will in their daily lives. We hope, by offering it to you, to provoke similar conversations when you gather to study together. For each session, we provide the text in the New Revised Standard Version, followed by our own translation from the original Greek. Romans is especially hard to translate, because Paul is “playing” on certain Greek words, over and over again, that do not have precise English equivalents (faith/faithfulness, gift,

grace, sin, justice/justification). Our translations are not written for smooth reading in English, but to “unpack” the meaning of each passage as best we can. Where we comment on particular Greek terms used by Paul, the Greek word will be included inside brackets in the translation. All technicalities of Greek grammar will be set aside in this connection, with only the dictionary form of the relevant Greek word inside the brackets. All of these tools are spread out here for you to use in working toward your own understanding of Romans for your path of faithfulness in the context where you live. Our interpretations are the fruit of our own wrestling with the text. But where you read it, with perhaps a small group of other Christians, Christ will also be in the midst of you, as he promised.

As we begin this study, we are reminded of the plea of the great 20th century biblical scholar and theologian Karl Barth, whose theological interpretation of Romans changed the landscape of modern biblical interpretation:

“Of my friendly readers I ask that they should take nothing from me which they are not of themselves persuaded stands within the meaning of what Paul wrote. Of my unfriendly readers I ask that they should not reject as unreasonable opinion of my own what, in fact, Paul himself propounded” (Barth, “Author’s Preface” to *The Epistle to the Romans*, cited in Grieb, 1).

Historical Background

Before we begin our promising journey through Romans, we must identify some important historical background on the letter. First, Romans is unique in that it is the only letter Paul wrote to a church or churches he did not found and had never visited (see Rom 1:10-13). The only expressed reference to any particular “church” in Rome occurs in 16:5 (compare 16:14, 15), where Paul asks the recipients of his letter to greet the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila. This suggests there were several house

churches in Rome at the time, thus explaining Paul's opening address in the letter "to all God's beloved in Rome" (1:7) rather than a specific reference to a particular church (see, for example, 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1). This should not be surprising, given that "the household was the standard social and economic unit of city life during this time" (Grieb, 5). We cannot determine whether these various, smaller house churches ever assembled together at a common meeting place. We can be sure, however, that they included both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus.

This first point leads to a second consideration regarding the background of Romans. Scholars cannot be certain of the social makeup of the Roman church (or churches) at the time Paul wrote. It is almost certain from clues in the letter, however, that Paul is writing to both Jews and Gentiles who believe Jesus is the Jewish Messiah (that is to say, the "Christ" – *christos* in Greek). According to the Roman historian Suetonius (ca. 115 CE), Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in the year 49 CE on account of riots over someone called "*chrestos*." This likely reference to Jesus Christ suggests that the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ among the Jews of Rome led to public conflict and the subsequent expulsion of all Jews as a result of the dispute. After the expulsion, the Christian churches in all probability continued under the leadership of Gentile Christians. Without the influence of the Jewish followers of Christ in the churches, they probably discontinued dietary and worship regulations mandated by Jewish law (Torah). Then, upon the return of the Jews to Rome in 54 CE (including those Jews who were also followers of Jesus), the two distinct groups of Jews and Gentiles were reunited in the various house churches. That meant they had to learn how to live together again, including a determination on the applicability of provisions of the Jewish law (Torah) to their common life together. Paul subsequently writes this pastoral letter, which includes some passages clearly written for Gentile audiences and other passages undoubtedly addressed to the Jewish followers of Jesus, seeking to reconcile these Christians divided over the importance of particular practices in their daily lives together. In other words, the letter

“almost certainly presupposes an actual historical situation known to the author and to his first hearers/readers” (Grieb, 1).

This reconstructed background for the letter explains why it appears from the letter that God may be “on trial” in these Roman churches. The “justice” of God may be in question, especially among those Jewish followers of Jesus who are now seeing that Gentiles are freely accepted into the church without the necessity of observing the Torah, or Jewish law. They might be asking such questions as “is God really just, since it appears God has abandoned God’s special promises to God’s people – the Jews?” or “is God being just in accepting these Gentile sinners, who rejected the Torah, after all these years of our Jewish faithfulness?” This concern would explain why this letter, in contrast with Paul’s other letters, is overloaded with words that bear the Greek root *dik-*, which is the root of various nouns and verbs translated as “justice,” “righteousness,” “justification,” “justified,” etc. In Romans Paul uses examples from this word group over 60 times. The next highest frequency of use is only 12 times in 2 Corinthians and 11 in Galatians.

Similarly, in Romans Paul uncharacteristically refers to the noun “sin” or its verb form “to sin” over 50 times. The next highest frequency of use of these terms is 12 times in 1 Corinthians and 4 in Galatians. This suggests that Paul is *responding* to the ways that some people in the Roman churches are regularly using this word group in their own situation, rather than thinking it is a topic that is central to Paul’s gospel.

Next, there is almost certainly another reason Paul writes this letter to the Christians in Rome. He seeks the financial backing of the Roman Christians for the new mission to Spain he is planning (see Rom 15:22-33). To gain the financial support of Christians who are not familiar with his “gospel,” however, requires Paul to persuade them that his version of the good news is trustworthy. Since there were many leaders in the early church who opposed Paul’s apostleship and the terms on which he proclaimed Christ to the Gentiles (see, for example, Gal 1:1-2:14), Paul must write

convincingly if he hopes to gain the confidence and support of the Christians in Rome.

Finally, we must remember that Paul's concern in Romans is not so much to write a theological treatise as it is to give moral exhortation designed to shape a certain kind of community ethos. He is attempting to persuade both Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus how to live together harmoniously in a community of character shaped by the person of Jesus and the power of God at work through Jesus. Thus, all of Paul's exhortation is theological – grounded in his interpretation of what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and continues to do in the lives of those who follow Jesus and conform their character to his.

Overview of the Sessions

In this study we read and reflect on ten important passages from Romans, addressed in sequence, plus two optional studies on other passages in the letter. Our format for the study of each passage is the same. First, we will provide the translation of the passage from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. This is followed by a section called "A Translation for Study, with Commentary." This section will offer our own translation of the original Greek text, followed by any relevant notes on the translations and short commentary interpreting the passage. Finally, the study concludes with some reflection questions to help you focus on how the text might shape your own discipleship in daily life. These are designed for use by individuals, small groups, and classes.

In carrying out the study, we suggest that you use an entire week to work carefully through the passage for a single session, working on the questions for reflection toward the end of the week. Then gather with a small group to share the fruits of your study, to raise questions, to encourage one another, and to welcome Christ among you in holy conversation.

Our studies are written in conversation with two recent books on Romans, which are readily available to you, to amplify your experience. They are: (1) A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); and (2) Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2001). These books are easily obtainable through Amazon.com or by order through a local bookseller. They are not written just for biblical scholars or clergy, but with a wider audience in mind. Specific references to quotations from Grieb or Johnson in this study will be designated by the author's name, followed by the page number (for example: Grieb, 1).

We are now ready to begin our journey through one of the most important and influential writings in the Christian canon and Christian history, Paul's Epistle to the Romans.