PARALLEL GUIDE 26
The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Part I

Summary

Here begins a three-chapter discussion of the Letter of Paul to the Romans and its theology. The author of the text uses this vehicle for exposing the theology of the New Testament. This chapter studies the setting for the letter to the Romans, with a close look at the first four chapters.

Learning Objectives

• Read the Letter of Paul to the Romans, chapters 1-4,

• Learn the audience and the purpose of the Letter of Paul to the Romans

• Learn the setting for Paul's letter to the Romans; the church in Rome

• Explore how Paul uses the Old Testament

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Paul is proclaiming the gospel to people who have not heard it. He "is not ashamed" of it. How would you go about this task? Would you feel anxious or ashamed because the good news defies cultural wisdom? How would you express it, if you found yourself in a situation such as Paul encountered?

2. Take time to ponder the meaning of: "redemptive anger is a footnote to love" (page 384). Keep some notes on your thoughts.

3. How do you respond to people who, in your opinion, are engaged in vices that you find unacceptable?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Paul does not deny his Jewish background. Indeed, he affirms it and perceives Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Although Paul does not expect Gentiles to practice all the requirements of Judaism, he nevertheless totally roots the experience of Christ in the Old Testament revelation. What does this say to us today about our relationship to both the Old and the New Testament?

Additional Sources

For works cited in the text and suggestions for further reading, see the bibliography in the Parallel Guide at the beginning of Chapter Twenty-eight.

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Chapter 26
THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS, PART I

The Church in Rome

No one knows when or by whom the Roman church was founded. A reasonable guess is that Roman Jews on pilgrimage to Jerusalem accepted Jesus as Messiah and returned with this conviction to the imperial capital. The account given by an anonymous fourth-century Roman Christian known to us as "Ambrosiaster" may not be far from the truth:

It is known that Jews lived at Rome in apostolic times, because they were subjects of the Roman Empire. Those of them who believed [i.e., became Christians] taught the Romans that, professing Christ, they should keep the Law. . . . Moreover, one ought not to be angry with the Romans, but even to praise their faith; since, though seeing no displays of great deeds, nor any of the apostles, they accepted the faith of Christ, though with Jewish rites. (Ad Romanos 3)

Two Jewish Christians from Rome, Prisca and Aquila, were friendly with Paul, and they are named first in Paul's greetings at the end of the letter (16:3-4).

If the Roman church was founded by Jewish Christians, it soon had to learn to do without them. In 49 CE the emperor Claudius banished the Jews from Rome, and Jewish Christians had to leave with all other Jews (Acts 18:2-3). According to the Roman historian Suetonius, the reason for this expulsion was that "the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Latin: impulsore Chresto)" (Suetonius, Life of Claudius 25.4). The words "at the instigation of Chrestus" may refer to disturbances caused by Christian Jews expounding their views to the rest of the Jewish community. The garbled name "Chrestus" might have been taken by the authorities to refer to a contemporary, especially since Jesus' followers no doubt insisted that he was alive.

With the accession of Nero (54 CE), the banishment seems to have lapsed, and many Jews returned to Rome. Jewish Christians were presumably among them. By that time the church had been run for five years by Gentile converts alone. It is not difficult to imagine tensions rising between the two groups. Paul's letter may have been designed, at least in part, to address such tensions.

According to the Book of Acts, when Paul visited Rome some years later, there were already Christians in the city (Acts 28:15-16). When addressed by Paul, however, the leaders of the Jewish community seem to have been unaware of his connection with the Roman Christians. What they knew of Christians was only that they were a sect "everywhere spoken against" (Acts 28:21-22). This is perhaps an oblique reference to the riots that had disturbed their community a decade or so earlier, or perhaps it was a hostile reaction to the continuing success of the Christian mission. There is no clearer evidence of that success than the disaster that overtook the church in the Neronian persecution of 64. Although Tacitus' description of the church as "an im-

mense multitude" (Annals 25.44) may be something of an exaggeration, the Christian community must at least have been large enough for it to have been represented with some semblance of credibility as a threat to public order.

The Occasion and Genre of the Letter

Paul was not known personally to the Roman church (1:13). Between 54 and 58 CE, intending to come to Rome and pass on from there to missionary work in Spain (15:28), he wrote to the Romans, perhaps partly to

secure their support. His letter was long—as much by ancient standards as by ours—and he chose to cast the chief part of it in a form known to ancient literary critics as logos protreptikos, or "persuasive discourse," a type of address that was generally associated with the choice of a particular philosophical school in philosophical discourse, or with the choice of philosophy itself.

Why did Paul choose to write to the Romans in this form? He may have acted in the light of Jewish precedent. The Wisdom of Solomon, which appears to have influenced him in other respects, certainly seems to have protreptic features. More decisive, however, was perhaps something in the nature of the gospel itself. The ancients generally seem to have associated ultimate truth claims and demands for appropriate living with philosophy. Seneca wrote:

[Philosophy's] sole function is to discover the truth about things divine and things human. From her side religion never departs, nor duty, nor justice, nor any of the whole company of virtues which cling together in close united fellowship. (Epistles 90.3)

Joining a philosophical school involved many of the ideas, and even the emotions, that we associate with religious conversion. At this period, as Martin Hengel has pointed out, the most striking parallels to our understanding of vocation "occur pre-eminently where philosophy laid a claim to truth" (Hengel 1981, 27; see also 28-33). This was precisely the point. Paul's purpose in his letter to the Romans was to persuade his hearers to a favorable view of his beliefs about God and God's promise—"my gospel" (2:16). By using the protreptic form he immediately made it clear that what he was presenting was not simply another oriental religious cult—a superstitio ("superstition") as the Romans would have called it, destructive both of family life and of Roman order—but rather a witness to ultimate truth, "the power of God for salvation" (1:16). In response to such a gospel no "reasonable service" was possible other than total obedience, the presentation of one's whole being "as a living sacrifice" (12:1).

Paul's argument was slanted in particular toward divisions and tensions in the Roman church. To be precise, he discerned at least two groups. First were some who had accepted Jesus as Messiah, but who believed that Paul's admission of uncircumcised Gentile men to full fellowship, simply on the basis of faith in Jesus, was an abandonment of God's Law. These would see in Paul's gospel of "grace for all" both an implicit denial of Israel's calling and a proclamation of moral indifference. Second were those—mostly but not necessarily all of Gentile origin—who resented the claims of the former group and felt, or claimed to feel, superior to those who still held to Jewish customs.

A strategic reason for Paul's undertaking to address these groups is not difficult to see. He hoped for support from the Roman congregations for his projected mission to the West (15:23-24). The more generally his gospel was understood and accepted among them, the more broadly and soundly based that support would be.

Paul was convinced that an approach to the gospel that founded it on anything other than the justice and grace of God available for all who would put their trust in the Son of God amounted to rejection of the gospel. "You who want to be justified by the law," he wrote on another occasion, "have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4; cf. 1:6-9). Paul was also convinced that those who did accept that gospel were committed by it to emulating the grace by which they were saved: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). In other words, as Paul considered the two groups, the former inclined to reject the latter because it did not hold to Jewish customs, the latter inclined to reject the former because it did, it would have seemed to him that what was at stake was not merely a matter of strategy, but the gospel itself. Hence the vigor—and the abiding importance—of his protreptic. In one of G. K. Chesterton's less fortunate moments he described tolerance as the virtue of those who have no convictions. Nothing could more plainly demonstrate the falsity of this remark than the

letter to the Romans, which is everywhere passionate in its convictions, and everywhere a plea for tolerance among Christians of different traditions and emphases.

The Integrity of the Letter

Some early copies of the letter circulated in the form in which it appears in our Bibles, some without the last two chapters, and some just without the last chapter. Which was the original form? Various views have been taken, and several commentators have suggested that chapters 15 and 16, or at least chapter 15, were originally a note to the church at Ephesus. This is possible but there are (as we will see when we come to it) also good reasons for seeing 15 as closely attached to what precedes it. It is not difficult to see why some early copyists might have dropped 15 and 16 (especially 16) as having little doctrinal significance and being less suitable for reading in church. For the purpose of our present study, then, we accept 15 and 16 (except for the closing doxology at 16:25-27) as integral parts of the original letter that Paul wrote to Rome. This is the view of most recent commentators.

The somewhat involved style of 16:25-27 does make these verses rather different from the rest of the letter, and reminds us a little of the Letter to the Ephesians. If the letter had been shortened to make it more suitable for reading in church—and this certainly seems the most likely explanation for the existence of the shorter versions—then it is also possible that at some point "the shortened edition was supplied with a solemn ending in the form of a doxology composed on the analogy of Ephesians 3:20-21, and embodying certain Pauline ideas" (Dodd 1932, 245). Later copyists, faced with shorter and longer versions, would simply have decided to transfer the doxology to the end of the longer version rather than lose it.

Classic descriptions of protreptic describe it as having three main elements: first,

dissuasive against views that the author regards as false; second, demonstration and defense of the author's own views; and third, exhortation (parainesis) to adapt a manner of life that accords with the author's views. These three elements can clearly be distinguished in the letter to the Romans, as is indicated in the following outline of its contents.

An Outline of the Letter

1) The Epistolary Opening (1:1-15)
2) The Protreptic (1:16-15:13)
First Part: A Dissuasion (1:16-4:25)—against dependence on anything except the justice and mercy of God
a. The Nature of the Gospel (1:16-17)
b. God's "No!" to Injustice (1:18-32)
c. God's "No!" to our Injustice (2:1-3:8)
d. God's "Yes!" through Jesus the Messiah (3:9-31)
e. The Example of Abraham (4:1-25)
Second Part: Demonstration and Defense (5:1-11:36)—peace with God through Christ
a. Demonstration:
i. Reconciliation in Christ (5:1-11)
ii. Life in Adam and Life in Christ (5:12-21)
b. Defense (1): Does the Gospel Undermine the Commandment?
i. The Gospel and Obeying God's Commands (6:1-23)
ii. The Gospel and the Law (7:1-8:39)
c. Defense (2): Does the Gospel Call in Question God's Faithfulness to the Promises?
i. The Problem of Israel's Unbelief (9:1-10:15)
ii. The Final Salvation of All Israel (10:16-11:32)

Third Part: An Exhortation (12:1-15:13)—An Invitation to the Christian Life
a. Grounds for the Exhortation: Proper Response to God's Mercies (12:1-2)
b. Some Basic Principles for Life in the Church (12:3-13)
c. Relations with the World at Large (12:14-13:14)
d. Further Notes on Life in the Church: The Problem of the "Strong" and the "Weak" (14:1-15:13)
3) Epistolary Conclusion (15:14-16:23)
a. Paul's Plans (15:14-33)
b. Commendation of Phoebe (16:1-2)
c. Greetings to God's Household (16:3-16)
d. Paul in His Own Hand (16:17-20)
e. Greetings from Paul's Colleagues (16:21-23)

The Epistolary Opening

Examining the Text 1:1-15

Paul writes as the "slave" (Greek: doulos, NRSV "servant") of Jesus Christ. "He belongs to his Lord and his Lord answers for him" (Barth 1962, 10). He writes as one "called to be an apostle"—called, that is, to be the agent of Christ and as therefore "set apart," that is, consecrated "for the gospel of God." Does that mean "God's good news" or "the good news about God"? It means both. This good news is rooted in all that has gone before in the Hebrew tradition (1:2-3), yet it is also about something

totally new: one who on a human level is Messiah and in the divine order is marked by the Resurrection as "Son of God with power" (1:4, perhaps a reminiscence of Dan. 7:14; cf. Mark 9:1; 14:62). (The language here is unusual in Paul, and it is likely, though not certain, that he is quoting a formulary known to the Roman church.) The good news of which Paul speaks concerns "Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:4b), through whom Paul has been given the privilege of being apostle to the Gentiles, including those at Rome (1:5-6). The purpose of his apostleship is to "bring about the obedience of faith," the attitude of trusting submission to God that allows God alone to be sovereign and does not insist on its own superiority or merit.

Even in his greeting Paul emphasizes that it is for "all the nations" that he has been made apostle. He addresses his salutation "to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (1:7). "Saint" (Greek: hagios, often translated "holy") says nothing about the virtue of those addressed. It speaks of their relationship to God. The basic idea is that of "setting apart." The Christians at Rome are "set apart" for God because God has freely and graciously chosen and called them, not for any merit on their part.

Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Recipients 1:8-15

Paul gives thanks for "all" the Christians at Rome, not on the basis of their wisdom or virtue but only because their "faith"—their willingness to trust God's promise—is "proclaimed throughout the world" (1:8). "This is sufficient ground for thanksgiving. The stone has been rolled away from the door of the tomb. The Word has free course. Jesus lives; and he is in the metropolis of the world" (Barth 1933, 32).

Paul already belongs to the Christians at Rome in the fellowship of prayer (1:9), and he longs to see them, to share with them what God gives him to share, and in that sharing to be enriched by them (1:10-12). (Paul well understood what it is to be a teacher.) He wishes to visit them because his apostleship can recognize no boundaries of nation or place, so he is eager to come to Rome (1:13-15).

The Protreptic—1:16-15:13

First Part: A Dissuasion—1:16-4:25—Against Dependence on Anything Except the Justice and Mercy of God

The Nature of the Gospel 1:16-17

Paul has already come to the substance of his letter. As a visitor from a provincial city, Paul might well expect to be overawed by the splendor of Rome, the capital of the empire. He is "not ashamed" of "the gospel," that is, of the good news of what God has done and is doing for humankind in and through Jesus Christ (1:16a).

Paul is "not ashamed" for three reasons:

First, Paul is "not ashamed" because the gospel is itself God's power "for salvation," that is, for deliverance from what oppresses. The gospel is God's power for salvation to "everyone" who "has faith," that is, to everyone who trusts in it, whether Jew or pagan (1:16). All in the Roman church stand by this gospel and by nothing else.

The word "faith" (Greek: pistis) is prominent in this verse (see Chapter Twenty-four). In view of a tendency, especially in some sectarian forms of Christianity, to place the wrong kind of emphasis on "faith," perhaps it is useful to say a little more about how Paul in particular, and scripture in general, uses the word.

We should note that behind various nouns in the NRSV—such as "faith," "belief," and "trust," with their related verbs ("have faith," "believe," "trust")—there lies a single Greek root, pist-. This root is generally used in the LXX to translate a Hebrew word that relates to notions of trustworthiness, reliability, faithfulness, and firmness. The causative verbal form of this Hebrew word, usually translated in the NRSV as "to believe [in]" (e.g., Gen. 15:6; cf. KJV, RV), means "to reckon trustworthy" or "to trust." The noun, usually translated in the NRSV as "faith" (e.g., Hab. 2:4), means "faithfulness," both in the sense of sticking by something or someone ("constancy") and in the sense of being worthy of such constancy.

The purpose of this explanation is to make clear that "faith," in the biblical and Pauline sense, has very little to do with feelings and a great deal to do with being reliable and standing by commitments. In the biblical sense, "to believe" or "to have faith" in God is to live and act on the basis of the supposition that God is trustworthy, whether we happen at any particular moment to feel that God is trustworthy or not. In this sense the church invites us in the creeds to confess that we "believe" in God. For sectarians the opposite of faith is doubt. For scripture the opposite of faith is unfaithfulness in the plain sense in which we speak of unfaithfulness in a marriage or any other relationship. The English theologian Austin Farrar wrote: "If you want to have faith, decide what you would do if you did have faith, and do it. That is faith."

There is a second reason why Paul is "not ashamed of the gospel." In it "the righteousness of God," that is, God's loyalty to the covenant with creation (Gen. 9:8-17) and with Israel (Gen. 17:1-8) is shown "from faith to faith; as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith" (1:17, NRSV alt.; cf. KJV). This is a difficult verse and has been variously understood.

Several different explanations have been offered for the phrase "from faith to faith." The church father Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 225) suggested that it meant "from the faith of the Law to the faith of the gospel" (Against Marcion 5.13). Augustine (354-430) interpreted it to mean "from the faith of the preachers to the faith of the hearers" (De Spir. et Litt. 11.18). Before making a decision about this matter, we note that there is a further ambiguity in the next part of the verse. Paul offers a quotation from the Book of Habakkuk: "The righteous shall live by faith (Greek: ek pisteōs)" (1:17b, quoting Hab. 2:4, RSV margin). The Hebrew original of the verse quoted by Paul is commonly understood to mean "the righteous person shall be preserved by his or her (own) faithfulness." The Greek LXX, however, at least in its usual form, appears to mean "the righteous person shall be preserved by my (Greek: mou, i.e., God's) faithfulness." Paul has basically used the LXX, but he has omitted the word "my" (mou). The result is that his quotation could be

understood either in the usually accepted sense of the Hebrew, or in the sense of the Greek.

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Why did Paul leave this ambiguity? Most probably because he intended to do so. If both senses were important to him, then we might understand the whole verse to mean that God's righteousness is revealed "from [God's] faithfulness to [our] faithfulness, as it is written, 'The righteous person lives on the basis of faithfulness.'" That is to say, God's faithfulness calls us and makes possible the response of our human faithfulness. This interpretation was proposed in the fourth century by Ambrosiaster (Ad Romanos 17.56) and more recently by Karl Barth (1933, 41).

God's "No!" to Injustice 1:18-32

Third, Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because God's wrath is revealed from heaven against human unrighteousness (1:18). How can "wrath" have anything to do with "good news"?—Because for Paul, and indeed for scripture generally, "wrath" is not the opposite of love. Anger means saying "No!" with passion and power. If you love me, you will reprove me when I am doing wrong: "Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me. Never let the oil of the wicked anoint my head" (Ps. 141:5).

Such anger can be redemptive. Perhaps thinking of this, Sir Thomas Brown wrote:

In my retired and solitary imagination, to detain me from the foulness of vice, I have fancied to myself the presence of my dear and worthiest friends, before whom I would lose my head, rather than be vicious. (Wayne 1949, 14)

Redemptive anger, we might say, is a footnote to love. In scripture God's anger is always like that, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights (Prov. 3:12; cf. Job 5:17-18; Heb. 12:5-11). So the wrath of God is, for Paul, not divorced from the "good news" of God. But what do people do to merit God's wrath? To this Paul now turns. As always in his letter to the Romans, we may suspect that Paul has one eye on the divided Christian community he is addressing.

In verses 1:19-23 Paul says that humanity is consistently guilty of idolatry. Instead of giving to God what is due to God, we choose to render honor first to images of ourselves and then to images of even lesser things. Paul presents this accusation in the form of a midrash ("interpretation") of the story of Adam (humanity) in Genesis 2-3. In Genesis, Adam is in a position of complete openness with God, known by God and knowing God. The Lord God has lavished upon Adam every gift: existence and life (Gen. 2:7), a good place to be (Gen. 2:8-9), a job to do (Gen. 2:15), a joyful relationship with the creatures (Gen. 2:19-20), and—the supreme gift—the opportunity and ability for open and intimate relationship with another creature, equal and like, but also unlike. Man with woman and woman with man, they "were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25).

Of human beings in such a situation we can say what Paul says: What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely, God's

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eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (1:19-20, NRSV alt., cf. KJV)

What happens? The possibilities of being human are not enough for them: "For though they knew God, they

did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21). They do this by claiming for themselves something that is truly a possibility only for God. In the words of the Book of Genesis, they claimed the ultimate arbitration, the knowledge of good and evil. In Paul's words, they claimed "to be wise" (1:22). We need to remember that in speaking of "the knowledge of good and evil" Genesis was not speaking of humanity attempting to develop a moral sense. The Book of Genesis is speaking of humanity's claim to exercise the prerogatives of absolute ruler and absolute God: to arrogate to itself the judgment that God alone can truly exercise. In short, Genesis is speaking of men and women claiming to be like God, which is idolatry (Gen. 3:5; cf. Ezek. 28:2, 6, 9, 17).

For the authors of the Book of Genesis and for Paul, idolatry is the supreme unrighteousness. Unwilling to accept their human limitations, the man and the woman assume for themselves the wisdom and stature of God. The irony is that they are led astray by a snake and give themselves into the hands of what is actually less than human. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (1:22-23).

What then? Those who claim to be as gods, of course, are claiming a lie, and therefore can never afford to be open with anyone. To claim the knowledge of good and evil kills love. Both Genesis and Paul speak of the immediate result of disobedience in terms of broken relationships and enslavement to "desire" (Greek: epithymia): "Therefore God gave them up in the evil desires of their hearts to corruption, to the dishonoring of their bodies (sōmata) among themselves" (1:24, NRSV alt.).

The Greek word sōma, like English "body" (by which it is usually translated) can carry a whole range of meaning, from (1) "dead body" through (2) "living body" in contrast to "psyche" ("breath, spirit, mind") or "pneuma" ("spirit"), to (3) virtually "the total person," and so to (4), in a transferred sense, "body" as community or group. Here, as at verse 8:13, Paul seems closest to (2). At Romans 8:10, as at 6:6 ("body of sin"), 7:24 ("body of death"), 8:11, and 12:1, he seems closest to (3) (cf. also Phil. 1:20). At Romans 12:4-5 he seems to move naturally from (2) to the transferred sense (4).

In the rest of the chapter (1:26-32) Paul proceeds to list the kinds of vices that moralists usually denounce. Many parallels can be found to the list of vices he gives in verse 1:29. From Hellenistic Judaism we may compare the Wisdom of Solomon, 14:25-26, where the author sees the root cause of vice as idolatry. In Palestinian Judaism, the Qumran Community Rule denounces "the ways of the spirit of falsehood":

. . . greed, and slackness in the search for righteousness, wickedness and lies, haughtiness and pride, falseness and deceit, cruelty and abundant ill temper and much folly and brazen insolence, abominable deeds committed in a spirit of lust, and ways of lewdness in the service of uncleanness, a blaspheming tongue, blindness of eye and dullness of ear, stiffness of neck and heaviness of heart, so that man walks in all the ways of darkness and guile. (1 QS 4.2-4)

Stoic Moralists also Produced Lists of Vices

In considering the kinds of "vice" that Paul speaks of here, it is important for us to realize that at this point he is by no means intending to be controversial. He is listing types of behavior that he would have assumed any serious Jew at the time and most serious-minded pagans would have agreed with him were evil. This includes his references to what we call "homosexuality," a phenomenon that, despite some favorable precedents from Greek antiquity, was receiving a generally bad press in the first Christian century (see Nissinen 1998, 79-88). Paul was, in other words, simply speaking about these things as any average moral person in the first century would have expected him to speak, and his intention is not to present any new moral teaching, but merely to create a general frisson of disgust over the ways of the world that would pave the way for the next part of his argument. We should also note, however, that Paul does seem to present his sins in order of seriousness,

beginning with the “warm” sexual sins (1:24-27), and ending with the “cold” sins of pride and violence (1:28-31). Only of these latter does he say that those who do them are “worthy of death”(1:32).

As regards the particular question of homosexuality, we ought perhaps to note that the ancients appear to have made no distinction between homosexual behavior as deliberate choice and as arising from a psychological orientation whose nature and cause remains to this day something of a mystery—as therefore, for some, an inclination both unchosen and unavoidable. Doubtless therefore, as Brendan Byrne has pointed out, “Any modern assessment of the issue in which Scripture plays a part must take this gap between ancient and modern thinking into consideration” (Byrne 1996, 70).

For Paul, however, it is clear that particular vices or sins are only symptoms of the real disease (cf. Wisd. 13-14). The root cause of human problems is the denial of God’s sovereignty, the idolatrous claim to divine prerogative, of which he spoke from the beginning (1:20-23). Paul’s language makes this clear. “Therefore,” he says, beginning to speak of particular evils in the light of what he said before (1:24). “For this reason,” he continues, moving to another type of evil (1:26). Finally, “since they did not see fit to acknowledge God . . .”—he repeats the whole basis of his argument, in case by now we have forgotten it (1:28). The real unrighteousness of humanity, according to Paul, is the denial of God. This denial has led to a world of moral chaos, of helpless victims of “passion” (Greek: epithymia) (1:26), who utterly lacking that “self-control” (or “self-mastery”; Greek: egkrateia; cf. Gal. 5:23) that was in Paul’s day seen by both Jew and Gentile alike as the human ideal.

God’s “No!” to Our Injustice 2:1-3:8

So far Paul’s statements are understood in a general sense. He speaks of humankind as a whole. Now he draws closer to the situation in the Roman church. He echoes, perhaps deliberately, the words of Jesus (Matt. 7:1; cf. Luke 6:37): “Therefore you have no excuse . . . whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, for you that judge are doing the very same things” (2:1, NRSV alt.; cf. KJV, RV).

Paul addresses an imaginary dialogue partner. Tactfully (for the moment) he is somewhat vague about just who his partner might be. This somewhat oblique approach means that the person he addresses could be a philosophically-minded Gentile; or perhaps a Gentile who had turned to Jesus Christ; or perhaps again a Jew; or perhaps even a Jew like some of Paul’s hearers—a Jew who had added belief in Jesus as Messiah to an original belief in Israel’s covenant status and the necessity of the Law. Precisely what sort of person Paul’s hearers are to imagine will emerge only as the conversation continues. For the moment he makes a simple point: “whoever” this person is, to pass “judgment on another” is to “condemn” oneself, because the person in question is doing “the very same things.” Whatever particular kind of person is supposed to fit this brief portrait, the portrait is also, quite clearly, something of a caricature, at least as far as anyone in Paul’s real audience is concerned. Not for one moment need we suppose Paul imagined that there were any among his good listeners in the Roman church, Jewish or Gentile by origin, who were personally rushing into the riot of evil he had just described, or needed to be confronted with the consequences of that debauch. All of them, however, would have known perfectly well the position of someone—“whoever” they were—who did “judge another” in the manner described, and yet did “the very same things.” In short, Paul was presenting them with a familiar topos, an idea that they would have recognized at once: “It really doesn’t much matter what you say if you don’t do. In fact, the better you talk, the worse things are if you don’t live up to it.”

“We know,” Paul continues, “that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth” (2:2). Well, of course. Any right-minded person ought to know that. “Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things, and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?” (2:3) Obviously, anyone who supposed such a thing would be mad. Yet Paul continues to hammer away at

the point. Would not to think and behave in such a way be to "despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience" (2:4a)? Wouldn't such a person know that such "kindness" and "patience" were always "meant to lead" them "to repentance" (2:4b)? The Psalmist had pleaded with God to overlook his sins on the grounds of God's "compassion" and by appeal to God's "mercies" (Ps. 25:6-7) —but he had also clearly offered amendment of life (vv. 15, 20). By contrast, would not such stubborn persistence as theirs merely be storing up for them "wrath" on "the day of wrath" (2:5)?

No one among Paul's hearers could disagree. The Book of Wisdom had used the same arguments to speak of God's "patience" with the Gentiles (Wisd. 11:23b; 12:8-11). But Paul now goes further. "There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone

who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality" (2:9-11). Obedience is obedience, Paul says, and disobedience is disobedience, whoever does it (contrast Wisd. 12:20-22; Ps. Sol. 18.4). This, for some among Paul's audience might be a little more painful, but still they could scarcely argue. The Book of Sirach said exactly the same thing: "The Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality" (35:15). Had not the prophet Amos said that precisely because of Israel's privileged position, the Lord's anger was the more severe against Israel when it transgressed (Amos 3:2)?

Throughout this tirade—throughout what Paul has already said, and what he is about to say—we who are influenced by Luther (and no serious modern Christian of whatever denomination can [or even should] avoid being influenced by Luther to some extent) have an enormous and constant temptation to try to find some "gospel" in it—to claim, for example, that the "work" about which Paul is talking is "faith," or "looking for God's salvation." But if we wish to follow Paul's argument, that is precisely what we must not do. What Paul says from verses 2:1 to 3:29 must be taken in its plain and obvious sense, for he is talking about "judgment"; and what he is saying is that God's "judgment" of everyone is based on deeds, not status, or race, or privilege, or anything else. "All who have sinned"—all who have acted in ways that miss or go astray from God's will—"apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (2:12-13). Sometimes even Gentiles get it right. What then? When

Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (2:14-16)

This is the first time in the entire tirade that Paul mentions Jesus or the gospel, and there is a grim irony in it. "My gospel," he is pointing out, "takes sin and obedience, and believes God takes sin and obedience, just as seriously as you do." Sin is sin, and doing justice is doing justice, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, and whether you believe in Jesus Christ or not.

Paul moves to his second direct address to his imaginary partner, and now at last we do learn something about who the partner is: "You call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast about God" (2:17). Paul asks a series of questions, "Do you . . . ? Do you . . . ? Do you . . . ?" that touch on central commands of the Law —theft, adultery, idolatry, and blasphemy of the name of God. Paul does not imagine that his hearers are doing these things. His point is quite simple. His "Jew" is an obvious caricature, but his hearers all know perfectly well what would be the position of any Jews who boasted of his or her reliance on the Law and relation to God and yet

answered “Yes” to such questions as Paul is putting. Had not the Psalmist said it?

> “What right have you to recite my statutes,
> or take my covenant on your lips?
> For you hate discipline,
> and you cast my words behind you. . . .
> These things you have done and I have been silent;
> you thought that I was one just like yourself.
> But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.”
>
> (Ps. 50:16-21)

> “Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.”
>
> (Rom. 2:25; cf. 2:26-27, 29)

We must not by any device drag “gospel” into all this because if we do, we lose Paul’s rhetoric entirely. In one sense, of course, he was deadly serious, but in another, as a rhetorician, he plays a game. It was open to his imaginary partner (or, indeed, his Jewish listeners in the congregation at Rome) to say at any point during his tirade, “Of course we do not keep the Law properly all the time. Sometimes we all live like Gentiles. But God’s justice means that God is faithful to us, even when we fail God. You have said nothing of God’s mercy. Even for sins as terrible as those you mention, there is always a place for repentance.” All that, presumably, was as obvious to Paul as it is to us—as would have been Paul’s response—in effect, “Thank you. Then you concede that for our salvation we Jews do not finally rely upon the Law at all, and never have. We rely on God’s justice and God’s grace. That is what ‘my gospel’ teaches.”

Paul makes a point that continues to be valid. We who come from one of the great religious traditions are inclined at times to think ourselves superior to others who lack our background. If we make this dangerous initial assumption, it is perilously easy to treat those who are not of our religious group—who are not of the “elect,” we might say—as rather less than human. Paul’s warning is always valuable. Yet once that warning has been given, we can find ourselves faced with the opposite question—as doubtless Paul himself had been faced, again and again. What then is the point of belonging to a great religious tradition? Why did anyone bother with all that fasting and praying? “Then what advantage has the Jew?” (3:1) Paul’s answer is clear. “Much, in every way! For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (3:2). What greater privilege could there be than that the Scriptures were given to Israel? “Moses received the Torah at Sinai,” say the sages—and that alone makes Israel special (m.’ Abot. 1.1). “What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God?” (3:3) Paul hears the imaginary objector to his gospel—and such, doubtless, was an objection some Jews made to Paul’s gospel of “grace for all.” Later (in chs. 9-11) Paul will argue in detail why he does not accept this: for the moment he is simply content to say that it is not so. “By no means!” (3:4)

To say that our standing before God is not the result of our splendid heritage is not to make that heritage nothing. God remains faithful, though everyone in the world is false. As the Psalmist pointed out long ago, if

God is put on trial, God will certainly be vindicated (3:4; cf. Pss. 116:10-14; 51:4). Then Paul’s imaginary dialogue partner puts forward another possibility. Is it not that our disobedience actually gives God glory by showing God’s faithfulness for what it is (3:5-7)? The argument is false, of course. God does not gain glory from our disobedience. God gains glory because God is glorious. Later Paul considers this question in more

detail (6:1-8:39) Here, he simply rejects the argument out of hand. We need not doubt that Paul himself had been accused of making this claim (3:8). No doubt his assertion that, in the new age, Gentile male converts do not need circumcision did look to some like an abandonment of Torah and a license for chaos.

Is it then perhaps the case that Jews, through their possession of the Law, are actually worse off than the average pagan? "Are we Jews at any disadvantage?" (cf. 3:9) Perhaps it would be better not to know God's Law at all, since we obviously cannot live up to it! "No, not at all," Paul replies. If we really listen to the Law and the prophets, then we know that whoever we are, Jew and Gentile, scholar and ignoramus alike, we stand together in a solidarity of sin. "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9)—a claim that Paul then supports with a battery of quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures (3:10-18).

All this is clearly addressed "to those who are under the law," so that none may imagine that they constitute a virtuous exception (3:19). "For 'no human being will be justified in [God's] sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law" (as Paul has just shown) "comes the knowledge of sin" (3:20).

God's "Yes!" Through Jesus the Messiah

Is that *all* that comes through the Law? No, of course not. The main thing that comes from the Law is the knowledge of God's grace. "The righteousness" (the covenant loyalty) "of God has been disclosed apart from the law." "It is attested by the law and the prophets" (3:21). What the Torah and prophecy bear witness to, Paul argues, is "the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for all who believe" (3:22, NRSV alt.).

The Law and prophecy pointed to the truth. They were signposts. But they were not themselves the truth. The truth is "apart from" them. By speaking specifically of Israel's Torah, Paul points to a tension that we must always retain. We must avoid the cynicism that declares "no teaching or ideas are any better than any other; we can know nothing." We must also avoid that certainty of conviction—not in God, but in our doctrine of God—that becomes idolatry.

"Guilt," wrote Tennessee Williams in the preface to a collection of his plays, "is universal" (1963, 12). Williams speaks briefly, with the insight of a creative dramatist. His plays are in some sense the "argument" for his observation. Paul the rabbi has presented his case in a different way, but his conclusion is similar: "There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:22-23).

We examined the following verses when studying Paul's theology, wherein Paul speaks of God's grace offered to the world in Jesus Christ. The offer, says Paul, shows God's "righteousness"—God's loyalty to God's covenant. That loyalty appears in God's "forbearance" in overlooking our "sins previously committed" (3:25). It is also shown "at the present time" in God's continuing loyalty to us and in the fact that God treats as loyal ("justifies" or "acquits") anyone who "lives by the faith of Jesus" (3:16; NRSV "has faith in Jesus"; see Chapter Twenty-four on Gal. 3:22)—anyone who lives confident in the faithfulness that Jesus has shown and is enabled by it to live with some measure of faithfulness in return.

Paul concludes his argument by pointing out that, since we live on the basis of God's good will, all "boasting" is "excluded" (3:27). He has in mind the self-assertive Christian groups to whom he writes. We live, he points out, by faithfulness—God's faithfulness enabling ours—quite apart from merit or works of our own (3:28). The alternative is an absurdity: a God who is God of one group only. "Is God the God of Jews only?" (3:29) Clearly not. Paul appeals to the basic assertion of the Shema: "God is one" (3:30a). God will justify the circumcised "on the ground of faith" and the uncircumcised "through faith" (3:30b, NRSV alt.). The matter is not certain, but most commentators follow Augustine in saying that the variation in these two

phrases is only rhetorical (De Spir. et litt. 29.50).

The basis of God's relationship to us, then, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, is always God's faithfulness. "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? On the contrary, we uphold the law" (3:31). This is an important assertion if we are to understand Paul. Paul was accused by some of his fellow Jews, as well as by a good many later Christian commentators, of having abandoned the Torah. But Paul himself never believed any such thing. In what follows he presents some of his reasons.

The Example of Abraham 4:1-25

"What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?" (4:1) For Paul, the key to understanding the story of Abraham is given in Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:3). Abraham trusted. He had faith. That apparently was what mattered to God, for God "reckoned" it to him as if he were fully righteous. The word in the LXX for "reckon" is logizomai, a word the Greeks used of accounting. This is a strange way of accounting! God "reckons" to Abraham a righteousness that Abraham does not have: "Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness" (4:4-5).

A rabbinic principle of biblical interpretation known as gezerah shawah (analogy) allows passages of scripture that have a word in common to illustrate each other. Applying this principle, Paul now turns to Psalm 32: "So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works:

> 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
> and whose sins are covered;
>
>
>
> blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon
> (Greek: logizetai) sin.'"
>
> (4:6-8, citing Ps. 32:1-2)

Such, according to Torah, is the "reckoning" God uses.

Paul wishes to make an additional point, especially for the sake of his fellow Jews. God blessed Abraham. "Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised?" (4:9a) In other words, was the blessing given to Abraham as a Jew or as a human being? "We say, 'faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was [given] not after, but before he was circumcised" (4:9b-10). When God called him, Abraham was not a Jew, not a patriarch, and not a representative of the chosen people. The call to freedom began in the freedom of God, before and beyond all the contrasts of history, Jew and Gentile, Christian and pagan. God's call had nothing to do with any of these distinctions, nor was it bound to them. Abraham had nothing except what God gave him, and so his call was an event not just in the history of Israel, but in the history of humanity.

What then is to be said of circumcision and those other commandments that are the special joy and privilege of Israel? "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (4:11). Circumcision, like any sacrament, is the outward sign of grace. It points to the gracious Presence beyond history in whom history finds its meaning; but it is not itself the Presence, nor can the Presence be limited to it. When Abraham was circumcised, "the purpose was to make him the

ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised" (such as the Gentile Christians at Rome who have believed in God) "and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised." This is the faith that trusts God alone as its security and help and that is reckoned as righteousness (4:11b-12). Behind and before all our histories runs the generosity of God. "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (4:13).

Paul is being rabbinic. The promise to Abraham in the Book of Genesis refers only to "the land," i.e., to Israel (Gen. 12:1; 17:8), but it is extended in rabbinic tradition to include all the world, probably in the light of the related promises regarding "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3; cf. 17:5-6). Rabbi Nehemiah (c. 150 CE), in a passage whose argument is in some ways similar to Paul's, is quoted as saying: "Our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said, 'And he believed in the LORD [and he reckoned it to him as righteousness] (Gen. 15:6)'" (Mek. Exod. 14:31). Torah treated as if it had no relation to God's gracious faithfulness "brings wrath." "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and

be guaranteed to all his [Abraham's] descendants." God's promise is not just for one party at Rome, but for all parties! God's promise is "not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham," a faith which Abraham had when he was not circumcised and when he was not a Jew, "for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'" (4:16-17a; cf. Gen. 17:5).

Abraham is the ancestor of us all. This is not a threat, designed to rob any of their inheritance, but a celebration. There is a family that transcends the bonds or distinctions of parties or race. Those who know within themselves the miracle of longing for God's grace and glory are linked with far-off figures in every age who have experienced the same miracle. They are one with the first patriarch, who tremblingly placed his trust in El Shaddai, the All-Sufficient.

That unity is a miracle nonetheless and occurs only "in the presence of the God in whom he [Abraham] believed" (4:17a). Unity does not rest on any human achievement. Indeed, it reverses most human achievements as these express themselves in our institutions and behavior. It is an appropriate gift from the one who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17).

Paul does not speak of some philosophy of history or worldview. He does not describe a "profound" way of looking at events that finds them "meaningful," as opposed to a "superficial" way that does not. Some of the most profound minds looking at history can perceive only what Camus described as a "hopeless encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe" (Short 1973, 80). Paul is aware, as he recalls Abraham's story, that in hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, "So numerous shall your descendants be" (4:18; cf. Gen. 15:5).

For Abraham, as for all, much that surrounded him contradicted the promise of God. "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (4:19). Although Abraham may have been assailed, no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God. He grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised. That is why his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:20-22). Only God can create such faith in a human heart, and only God can reckon such faith as righteousness.

Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his [Abraham's] sake alone, but for ours also.

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (4:23-25)

Paul began this chapter with a question about remote antiquity (4:1). He ends by applying his understanding of the answer to that question to the people he is addressing. Those at Rome are what they are before God neither by their Judaism nor by their

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freedom from it, but only by their faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead. This theology never abandons the transcendent but leads directly to a demand that those at Rome begin the struggle to change their own attitudes and hence to change the world those attitudes help to create.

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End of chapter