

CHAPTER 1

The Background to Romans and Paul's Pastoral Occasion

This opening chapter intends to pull back the social and historical curtain and peer into the first-century world behind Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. This inquiry into the past is vital as it will help establish why Paul would even raise the matters of civil government and a citizen's duty to submit in Romans 13. When considering the full scope of all the details behind the epistle to the Romans, there is a strong reason to understand Paul prohibiting *private revolution* against the Roman empire.¹ If it does not mean this, then those who would use Romans 13 as a blanket exhortation for near total obedience to the magistrate (except for sin) need to provide an account of Paul's occasion and purpose behind the letter of Romans in general. They would further need to supply a plausible historical setting that accounts for the apostle's purpose in taking up the themes in Romans 13:1–7 more specifically.

Background to Paul's Epistle to the Church at Rome

Scholars are quick to point out that all Paul's letters, and indeed all the New Testament documents, are occasional in nature and written to address specific matters pertaining to a target audience. Yet Christians, pulpiteers, and theologians often forget to consider this component in their exposition.

1 By "private revolution," I mean a revolution undertaken by private citizens and not under the authority, jurisdiction, and leadership of a public magistrate. See chapter 7 for an elaboration on this notion.

This is perhaps the truest of Paul's letter to the Romans. In my experience, this Pauline epistle has been treated as the apostle's theological *magnum opus* or a compendium of Paul's doctrine of the gospel. And while Romans is indeed perhaps "the greatest letter ever written,"² the assumption that gets reinforced with such a claim is that Paul merely wrote the letter for the sake of theologizing, for the sake of expounding and extoling the glory of God in the doctrine of justification by faith. That is, readers often overlook or are unaware of the occasion that led Paul to write it in the first place.

On the other hand, when the occasion of Romans is taken up, many only look to the explicit statements of the letter itself. That in itself is not a bad thing. Paul tells his readers that the epistle of Romans was a missionary letter of some kind meant to establish a base of operation for a Western Europe mission. No doubt this was the surface reason Paul gave (Rom. 15:24, 28). "Whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while. . . . Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain." But then why does Paul take sixteen chapters to make such a request, and then only to make the request toward the conclusion at that? Was his reputation and title as an apostle not sufficient to request this from the church there in Rome? The contents of the letter and its historical background have led many to delve into a deeper investigation of the occasion driving Paul to spend so much time on the matters he took up.

This is very much the central dispute in what is often referred to as "the Romans debate." Consider the comments of F. F. Bruce in a series of essays collected in a book with the same title: "The 'Romans debate' is the debate about the character of the letter . . . and, *above all, Paul's purpose in sending it.*"³ Bruce's is one of numerous articles that take up varying views and perspectives. Without getting into the minutiae of each approach, the book's editor, Karl Donfried, carefully drew out two important methodological principles in his own article, only the first of which is of relevance to us here: "Any study of Romans should proceed on the initial assumption that this letter was written by Paul to deal with a concrete situation in Rome. . . . This methodological principle is of great importance since so many recent studies begin with the opposite assumption and *never* even explore

2 This was the title of John Piper's sermon series when he preached through Romans from 1998 to 2006.

3 F. F. Bruce, "The Romans Debate—Continued," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 175 (italics added).

the historical data available concerning Jews and Christians in Rome.”⁴ Can you imagine reading a commentary or a theologian, or even hearing a pastor work through Romans, where there is no exploration of the historical data that led Paul to write Romans?

To simplify the Romans debate, we may consider two popular options. First, Paul's purpose in writing to the Roman Christians was to raise funding and support for himself and establish Rome as the headquarters of his next missionary venture.⁵ Second, there was an occasion behind the letter and a pastoral purpose for which Paul was seeking to address various matters that had arisen in the church.⁶ Some have even wondered if perhaps this helps explain Paul's allusion to the “spiritual gift” mentioned in Romans 1:11. While other purposes have also been offered, they are either secondary to these two major proposals or sub-occasions of the various pastoral matters Paul was addressing.⁷

As is often the case, we do not have to pose an either/or scenario. These two options do not have to cancel out each other. Richard Longenecker astutely noted that “these two viewpoints, . . . while seemingly in opposition to one another, should probably not, however, be understood as mutually exclusive.”⁸ That is to say, if Paul desired the church at Rome to help him in his apostolic endeavors to Spain, he would have to treat any and all church wounds with a pastoral application of the salve of the gospel. Were these wounds left untreated, they could fester and cause a rupture in the church, potentially leaving Paul with further difficulties while on the mission field. Therefore, it is not whether one purpose or the other is correct. Both are at work in Paul's occasion for writing to the Roman Christians. This forces us to ask a follow-up question: What events and occasions might have brought about the wounds experienced by the church at Rome? For that, we must first delve into the beginnings and constituent makeup of this church.

4 Karl P. Donfried, “False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans,” in *The Romans Debate*, 103–104.

5 For this view, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 3–9.

6 See, for just one example, Paul B. Fowler, *The Structure of Romans: The Argument of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

7 For a summary of the various views, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 158–160. These various views are simply subcategories of the specific pastoral occasion causing Paul to address the potential problems.

8 Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 10.

Origins and Makeup of the Church at Rome

Little is known of the beginnings of the church at Rome. The most likely theory is that the original membership of the church at Rome was composed of the Jewish pilgrims and Gentile proselytes who had attended the festival of Pentecost in Acts 2. Of those represented in Acts 2, Luke recorded some to be from Rome (Acts 2:10–11). These pilgrims converted to the Way of Jesus of Nazareth and took their newfound beliefs with them back to Rome.⁹ Such a likely scenario would indicate (1) a church founded without a direct/in-person influence from an apostle, (2) a church constituted primarily if not exclusively of Jewish Christians, and therefore (3) a church that took many of its Jewish traditions with it from Jerusalem back to Rome. This accords nicely with the conclusions of New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer: “Roman Christians seem to have been in continual contact with the Christians of Jerusalem, and Christianity there seems to have been shaped by that of Jerusalem. . . . It seems to have been influenced especially by those associated with Peter and James of Jerusalem, in other words, by Christians who retained some Jewish observances and remained faithful to the Jewish legal and cultic heritage without insisting on circumcisions for Gentile converts.”¹⁰

This understanding of the Christians in Rome has a good historical pedigree as well. The fourth-century Christian writer known as Ambrosiaster said, “It is established that there were Jews living in Rome in the times of the apostles, and that those Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ *but keep the law*.”¹¹

Assuming, for now, this is true, how much more context does that lend to passages in Romans 14–15? The weaker brother was in dispute with the stronger over matters such as eating certain foods, feasts, and religious celebrations, honoring certain days on ritual calendars, and other religious/cultic rites either on the Jewish side or the Gentile. Indeed, if Gentiles slowly made their way into a predominantly Jewish Christian church, certainly

9 For a scholarly treatment and consideration of many historical sources, see Raymond E. Brown, “The Beginnings of Christianity at Rome,” in *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity*, ed. John P. Meier and Raymond E. Brown (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1983), 92–104.

10 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 33. See also Brown, “The Beginnings of Christianity at Rome,” 104, for a nearly identical statement.

11 Ambrosiaster, *Ambrosiaster’s Commentary on the Pauline Epistles: Romans*, trans. Theodore S. de Bruyn (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 2 (italics added).

ethnic and cultural tensions would be high. It seems more than probable that there was a clear indication of a Jew/Gentile rift in the church at Rome. But what could have caused it? And why would Paul want to correct it before he made Rome his new headquarters?

The first question requires more explanation, which we will discuss in the next section. However, even a cursory reading of the New Testament will bear light on the racial tensions between Jews and Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, and even Jews influenced by Gentiles (i.e., Hellenistic Jews) versus Jews who stayed in the promised land (see Acts 6:1). Consider the incident with Jesus and the woman at the well where it is recorded, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9). Or how it was almost certainly surprising that Jesus would bless a Syro-Phoenician Canaanite woman who was a "dog" (see Matt. 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–30). Then there was the early church division pitting the Hellenistic Jewish widows against the more pious "homeland" Jewish widows (Acts 6:1–7).

In fact, the most central Christian controversy the early church had to address was over Gentiles entering the covenant community without becoming Jews through old covenant physical circumcision. That is to say, Christianity's first major heresy was over how, under the administration of the new covenant, the ethnic division God had previously established in the old covenant was to be reconciled. Thus, you have the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 and the correspondingly similar letter from Paul to the Galatian churches addressing the same controversy at length.

Indeed, Galatians, in many respects, is like Romans as it, too, is dealing with a Jew/Gentile controversy. What is important historically and for relevance regarding the occasion of the writing of Romans is what Paul records in Galatians 2:11–16:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as

the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

That this incident happened in Antioch, likely the initial sending location and headquarters for Paul's first apostolic missionary journey to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1–3), is of extreme significance. It seems that the apostles and Christian leaders from Jerusalem were influenced into Jewish peer pressure from the "circumcision party" that came from Jerusalem. One New Testament theologian remarks of this incident, "The Jewish Christians let themselves be intimidated by their fellow Jews. They do not want to compromise themselves vis-à-vis their fellow Jews by contact with uncircumcised people."¹² If the apostle Peter was prone to such coercion and gross error, leading Paul's mother church in Antioch to fall astray (even Barnabas backslid!), certainly Paul knew the danger of Jew/Gentile fractures in a local church and how that could have devastating consequences on his missionary efforts. He also knew the deleterious influence that pro-circumcision Jews could have on Jewish Christians. That would include a private revolutionary spirit pervasive among most Jews from the Judean region.

All this is to say that if in Antioch Paul was willing to rebuke Peter for falling backward, away from new covenant worship to the old covenant divisions, as a "gospel issue," then how much more would a church like the one in Rome be tempted to make the same mistakes? Instead of the church at Rome being a great blessing and missionary hub for Paul, it would inevitably collapse into ethnic schism, leaving Paul without aid while on the field.

Jew and Gentile Church Constituency

So, what may have caused the rift between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome? While there is quite a bit of data to consider and sift through, it is well worth the effort to piece it all together. The goal here is to present results that seem plausible and very likely to explain the historical occasion giving rise to Paul's pastoral purpose. To begin with, we will look at the makeup of the city of Rome and, consequently, the church there.

¹² Jakob Van Bruggen, *Paul: Pioneer for Israel's Messiah*, trans. Ed M. Van der Maas (Philipsburg: P&R, 2005), 81.