

# ROMANS

THE IVP NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY SERIES



GRANT R. OSBORNE

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# COMMENTARY

## **PAUL INTRODUCES HIS MISSION AND THE GOSPEL (1:1-17)**

What do you say to a church you have never met but one that is facing a serious situation and desperately needs your help? How do you introduce yourself and your intentions in a way that will gain their trust and get their attention? Of course, Paul was undoubtedly well known to the Roman Christians by reputation, but he had not visited the church and had to win their trust. So he spends more time than usual introducing himself (1:1-5), expressing his desire to visit the Roman church (1:8-15) and summarizing the theme of his message (1:16-17). Du Toit (1989:192-209) argues that Paul is trying to do more than just introduce himself, that he has a rhetorical purpose in trying to persuade the Roman Christians of the centrality of his gospel message.

### **□ He Greets Them and Describes His Mission (1:1-7)**

One of the strange aspects of life is the way our best friends often do not remain close over the years. It is frequently the secondary friends who are still close years later. It all depends on their willingness to write letters. I remember one family who did many things with us, but we have not seen or heard from them in over twenty years since we moved: out of sight, out of mind. Paul was the opposite; he was a letter writer, and that was one of the keys to success in his ministry. Here he writes a letter to a church he did not even know! This demonstrates his deep love and concern. Yet it was a church he deeply cared about, and

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it had a problem he could not ignore—conflict between two different “congregations” in the same church, namely, Jewish and Gentile factions. The solution he sees here lies in promise (v. 2) and obedience (v. 5) (see Anderson 1993:25-40).

As in his other letters, Paul generally follows the normal Greek custom for writing letters, introducing himself first and then addressing his readers. But the normal Greek letter was quite simple: “\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_, greetings.” Paul’s introductions were far more complex, and the one in Romans is the lengthiest of all, containing the most complex description of himself and his ministry. The reason: He is describing to them his gospel, the subject of much of this letter, as well as reminding them of his credentials.

**The Prescript (1:1)** Paul typically begins with a statement of his office but here breaks the pattern by first emphasizing his Lord and Master, calling himself “a slave of Christ Jesus.” This should not be watered down to NIV’s *servant of Christ Jesus*, for Paul is alluding to the fact of slavery in the Roman empire (it is estimated that 85 to 90 percent of the population of Rome and Italy were slaves or of slave origin; see Rupprecht 1993:881) as well as to the metaphor of slavery in the Old Testament. After the people of Israel were liberated from slavery in Egypt, it became common for them to call themselves “slaves of God” (Lev 25:55 [NIV, “servants”]) as a title of honor designating their new allegiance. Many of the leaders of Israel (Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and Elijah) called themselves God’s slaves. Since Jesus has become both Lord and God, now Paul is the slave of *Christ Jesus*, with emphasis on the messianic office, i.e., Messiah Jesus. Paul is saying not only that he belongs to Christ but also that this is a privileged state. In the Roman world slaves were protected and even paid by their owner; they were members of the owner’s extended family and often had higher social status as slaves than they did after gaining their freedom. So Paul considers this a badge of honor, as should all believers.

*Apostle* is Paul’s more typical self-designation and has two basic

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**1:1** See Barchy (1992:66), who points to several differences between first-century slavery and that practiced in America: racial factors had no place; education was preferred, and often the slaves were more educated than the owners; slaves often had

meanings—a church representative or missionary (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25), and one of those *called* or chosen by God to be founding agents and leaders of the churches. We know some of them, beginning with the Twelve (called apostles from the beginning, Mk 3:14) but probably including also Barnabas (Acts 14:4), James (1 Cor 15:7), and perhaps Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7). The normal criteria for that high office included walking with the Lord as well as seeing the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22), but Paul was included on the basis of his having “seen” the Lord in the Damascus Road vision (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). Paul was especially “chosen” to be God’s envoy to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21), giving him authority (cf. Gal 1:1) that afforded this letter special weight as an official communication from God through Paul his chosen instrument.

Finally, he has been *set apart for the gospel*. This is a further definition of what it means to be called, specifying that Christ has chosen him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In Galatians 1:15 Paul says that he was “set apart . . . from my mother’s womb,” an allusion to the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5), and this may be alluded to here as well. Moo (1996:42-43) says that *gospel* here refers not only to the gospel message and its proclamation but also to the very events by which the gospel came to be, God sending his Son as the sacrifice that produced salvation. Thus *by Jesus Christ and God* should be seen as indicating origin; that is, this gospel came from God. Lohse (1995:127-40) notes that *the gospel of God* frames the letter (1:1-17; 15:14-21), which especially centers on the proclamation of justification in Christ. The gospel is central to Paul’s purpose in writing this letter.

**Defining the Gospel (1:2-4)** Paul now describes the gospel he has been sent to proclaim, noting three characteristics. First, he tells us it was *promised beforehand* in the Old Testament. Throughout Romans, Paul will be anchoring his theological points in Old Testament truth. This statement in verse 2 establishes the promise-fulfillment pattern that will dominate his use of the Old Testament. The verb is made up

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very responsible positions; they could own property and receive salaries; they had the same religious and cultural traditions as the free people; and they could expect to be emancipated by the time they were thirty.



of two parts, *promise* and *before*, with the latter drawing out the main aspect of the promise, that it was given ahead of time through the *prophets*. The idea of promise is frequent in the New Testament (especially in the writings of Paul, who employs it twenty-two of the fifty-two times it is used in the New Testament) to describe the blessings of salvation (e.g., Gal 3:22; 2 Cor 7:1; Heb 4:1; 10:23). Cranfield (1975:56-57, from Barth [1959:12-13]) points out how this idea dominates the letter. Anchoring these truths in the previous revelation by God in the Old Testament gives Paul's message special credence, providing a perfect introduction for an apostle the church had not yet met. The prophets here are undoubtedly not just those of the latter part of the Old Testament but would also include Moses (Acts 3:22) and David (Acts 2:30). It is important for us to realize that the Bible as a whole, and not just the New Testament, forms the *gospel*.

Second, the heart of the gospel is the Son of God as descended from David. Actually, there are two points in verse 3: his preexistence and his earthly existence. His preexistence is seen in that the Son "came into being" (*genomenou*—NIV, *was*) as a human. His earthly existence shows his royal messianic status. This is part of a movement from *descendant of David* (v. 3) to *Son of God* (v. 4). In fact, many believe that verses 3-4 stem from an earlier creedal statement. Yet the Davidic status of Jesus' messiahship is also important (cf. also Rom 15:7-9). The idea goes back to 2 Samuel 7:12-16, where David was promised an eternal throne. This led to the idea of a Davidic Messiah who would deliver the nation (Ps 89:3-4; Is 11:1; Jer 23:5-6; Ezek 34:23-24), an idea recognized both in Judaism (*Psalms of Solomon* 17—18; Qumran: 1QM 11:1-8; 4QFlor 1:11-14) and in the early church (Mt 1:1-16; Mk 10:47; 12:35-37; Jn 7:42; 2 Tim 2:8). Jesus then is the royal Messiah who has come to assume his throne.

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**1:3-4** For a good balanced treatment, concerning whether these verses stem from an earlier creedal statement, see Schreiner (1998:39-40). The balanced parallelism of the phrasing in verses 3 and 4 as well as the high Christology and non-Pauline language employed could point to an early pre-Pauline creed (so especially Käsemann 1980:10-13), but there are several cautions necessary, one of which is the speculative nature of the arguments. Proponents have to do a redactional study of those aspects coming from pre-Pauline tradition and those added by Paul himself. Paul could also be writing in a high prose style. Either way, however, this is a significant passage

Third, the gospel centers on God's *designation* (better than NIV's *declared*) of Jesus as his divine Son. The verb is similar in meaning to other terms signifying "appoint" or "assign" (Louw and Nida 1988:483). This has led some to an adoptionistic theology, claiming that Jesus was not the Son until "adopted" at his baptism or (here) at his resurrection. But that would be an overly literal interpretation of Paul here, and this merely says that at his resurrection God *designated* him Son. Jesus is also designated Son at his baptism (Mk 1:11 and parallels), and sonship defines his entire earthly existence. Moreover, I have already commented on his preexistence as Son in verse 3, so this simply means God has shown him to be Son in a new way at his resurrection. Schreiner (1998:42) notes that *his Son* in verse 3 refers to Jesus' "messianic kingship as the descendent of David," while in verse 4 *Son of God* refers to his enthronement as messianic King and Lord of all. It is better to take *in power* with the noun rather than the verb (contra NIV's *declared with power*), meaning Christ has been designated "Son-of-God-in-power" (so most recent commentaries). As Nygren points out (1949:51, in Stott 1994:50), "So *the resurrection is the turning point in the existence of the Son of God*. Before that he was the Son of God in weakness and lowliness. Through the resurrection he becomes the Son of God in power" (italics his). His sonship is now defined in terms of cosmic Lord with authority over heaven and earth (Mt 28:19). So the idea of *power* is important to the message, and it prepares for verse 5, where the gospel to the Gentiles is inaugurated by the "Son-of-God-in-power." It is also connected with the later statement that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" (1:16).

The basis of this new status is *the Spirit of holiness*. There is a certain "flesh-Spirit" dualism between verses 3 and 4, in which Jesus' earthly nature leads to (rather than "is contrasted with," see above) his Spirit-

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pointing back to early Christian tradition.

**1:3** See Hurtado (1999:226-27) for the positive meaning of this, contra Dunn (1988a). The idea moves from Jesus' earthly status as Davidic Son to his heavenly status as divine Son.

**1:4** Dunn (1988a:12) speaks of "antithetical parallelism" here, as if the Davidic sonship was somehow contrasted with the divine sonship. However, it would be better to speak of step parallelism: Paul is showing that Jesus is not only the Davidic Messiah but is also the Son of God.

given office. Some (e.g., Sanday and Headlam 1902:9) have taken *spirit* to mean Jesus' divine spirit rather than the Holy Spirit, but there are two problems with this view: flesh-spirit dualism in Paul normally refers to the Holy Spirit, and the *Spirit of holiness* is a more natural phrase for the Holy Spirit. From this standpoint, the Holy Spirit is the turning point from the earthly messianic ministry of Jesus to the eschatological lordship of Jesus as Son of God. There is a natural link between the resurrection of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:11 entitles the third member of the Trinity "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead," and it is the resurrection that is the turning point from the age of Jesus to the age of the Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8). Yet the strange phrase *Spirit of holiness* (occurring only here in the New Testament) may be more than a Semitic equivalent of "Holy Spirit." It might also mean that the Spirit "set Jesus apart" (the meaning of *holiness*) as cosmic Lord of all. *Jesus Christ our Lord* culminates verses 3-4 and concludes the christological movement from Son to seed of David to Son of God to Messiah to Lord. This incredible passage tells us that the Gospel is all about Jesus—Messiah, Son of God and Lord of all creation. To paraphrase J. B. Phillips's famous book, we must say that for most Christians "your Jesus is too small." We need to see Jesus not just as our friend and helper but also as God and Lord of all.

**Defining Paul's Mission (1:5-6)** The gospel is all about mission. Paul rejoices in the ministry to the Gentiles that Christ has graciously given him. The verse (in the Greek text) is framed by two prepositional phrases showing that Christ the Lord is both the instrument (*through him*) and the recipient (*for his name's sake*) of Paul's ministry. The Lord is the means and the focus of the gospel proclamation. Paul's goal is to honor and glorify the name of Christ. He gave Paul two things, *grace and apostleship*, which should be combined to indicate that Paul's apostolic commission as apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Rom 11:13; 15:16; Gal 2:8-9) was an undeserved gift of grace from Christ. Paul was always amazed that God had chosen him, the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15-16), to be his chosen instrument. That call was first to *all the Gentiles*. That this could mean "nations" and include the Jews is exemplified in Romans 1:16 ("first for the Jew, then for the Gentile")

and Paul's constant practice on his missionary journeys of beginning in the synagogues and then going to the Gentiles (so Stott 1994:51). But the term itself more often refers to Paul's Gentile ministry, and that is likely here (so Cranfield 1975:67; Moo 1996:53).

Paul's purpose is to bring them to *the obedience of faith*, a phrase that could mean "obedience to the faith" (objective genitive), "believing faith" (adjectival genitive), "the obedience that comes from faith" (genitive of source) or "the obedience that is faith" (genitive of apposition). While the first is unlikely (there is no article with *faith*), Dunn (1988a:17-18) is probably correct in saying that the latter two are probably both part of the meaning here. Obedience is the natural result of a faith relationship with Christ, and faith always produces obedience. They are interchangeable aspects of a proper relationship with Christ (similarly, see Garlington 1990b:209-13, arguing that the adjectival use preserves this deliberate ambiguity). Obedience also occurs in Romans 5:19; 6:12, 16, 17; 10:16; 15:18; and 16:19, 20, and is a central theme in any enumeration of the responsibilities of the Christian life. This phrase would also define the task of every church today—evangelism (faith) and discipleship (obedience) as inseparable aspects of a true New Testament church. To center upon one aspect and neglect the other is to be unbalanced and unbiblical.

Paul then includes the Roman Christians among the Gentile converts (v. 6). As several point out (Godet 1969; Cranfield 1975; Dunn 1988a; Moo 1996), Paul is subtly reminding them that even though he did not establish their church, they are still part of his apostolic commission. Thus he can address them with authority from God. Moreover, they are also *called to belong to Jesus Christ*; they join Paul (1:1) as chosen by Christ. The debate over whether this means the Romans were predominantly Gentile (so Sanday and Headlam 1902; Dunn 1988a; Moo 1996) or simply geographically existed among the Gentile nations (Cranfield 1975; Käsemann 1980) is difficult to know for certain (Bruce 1985 believes both are part of the meaning). *Among those who are called* could indicate either, but the former is slightly more probable in view of the likelihood that the Roman church was mainly Gentile (see Introduction).

**The Greeting (1:7)** In most of Paul's epistles the greeting is part of the

prescript and occurs with it, but here he has inserted a lengthy discussion of his gospel in order to anchor his right to address the church. So now Paul returns to epistolary convention and addresses the Roman church. He is writing to *all in Rome*, probably all the house churches in the city. His usual practice is to greet “the church” in the city, so this unusual form may indicate that there are too many to meet in one place and perhaps that he is addressing the factions in the city as a whole group (so Dunn 1988a:19). The believers are described as *loved by God and called to be saints*. One of the great truths of Scripture is that in spite of our sinfulness and rebellion, we are the objects of God’s divine love (Rom 5:8). That is the basis of our love for one another (Rom 12:19). The idea of the divine call has already been seen twice (vv. 1, 6) and is a major theme of this epistle, reminiscent of Israel as God’s elect (Is 49:1; 50:2; Jer 7:13). Here as in 8:29 (“predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son”) the election is primarily ethical and spiritual: they are *called to be saints* or set apart for him alone, pulled out from this world to serve him. Paul is calling us to recognize our special allegiance to the God who loves us and to begin acting upon it as his special people.

Paul’s greetings have always combined the Greek (“grace”) and Hebrew (“peace”) greetings, but they are also theologized as an eschatological promise that the Christian experiences God’s *grace* and the *peace* in an entirely new way as a result of what God and Christ have done. What the Greeks and Hebrews symbolically sought in their greetings has now been actualized in Christ. Finally, we can truly experience God’s grace and find peace. The reason is that God is our *Father*, establishing a whole new intimacy in our relationship with him, and Christ has become our *Lord* as a result of his resurrection (see especially v. 4 above).

### □ **Thanksgiving for Their Faith and a Prayer to Visit Them (1:8-15)**

The typical Greek letter contained a brief thanksgiving and prayer (usually formulaic), but Paul always expands this form to develop a

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**1:8** Note the direction of the thanksgiving. It is first to *my God*, expressing the deeply intimate relationship between Paul and his Father (cf. Pss 3:7; 5:2; 7:1 and so on). Second, it occurs *through Jesus Christ*, noting Christ not just as the means of the

theological message. In fact, it has long been recognized that his opening prayer often contains the basic thesis of his epistle (see O'Brien 1977). However, this paragraph does not so much contain the theme of the epistle as establish Paul's close relationship with the receivers. Paul was a man of deep love and concern, and that is reflected here. He also was God's apostle to the Gentiles, so as Schreiner points out (1998:48) the anticipated visit was not just personal but was the formal or official arrival of Paul as the emissary of Christ.

**Thanksgiving (1:8)** Paul rejoices primarily because all the world has learned about the Christians in Rome. While some (Hodge 1950; Barrett 1957) believe this means that their faith was so extraordinary that it was known everywhere, it is more likely that this refers not so much to the quality of their faith as to the fact of it (Bruce 1985; Cranfield 1975; Moo 1996; Schreiner 1998). Rome was the hub of the world, and as such the Roman church would be known everywhere. Paul was thankful that God had established his church there and that it had an effect everywhere. As Nygren says (1949:59), it was "a fountain of joy that the Gospel had been received with faith in the very capital of the world." There is a bit of hyperbole in *all over the world*, for it does not mean every single person has heard the report; it probably does mean all the churches and unbelievers everywhere (at least in the Roman world). The growth of the Gospel in Rome would have widespread repercussions. Paul rejoices as we rejoice in the successful evangelization of cities like Seoul, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Moscow and Beijing.

**Prayer (1:9-15)** Have you ever wanted to make a trip so badly that there was almost an ache in your heart? My wife and I have always wanted to visit Australia and New Zealand. I keep waiting for that invitation to speak, but it just has not come. This prayer shows a similar ache in Paul to visit Rome. This is occasioned by two things: the situation in Rome that needs his attention, and his desire to go on to Spain

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thanks but as the one through whom such worship is made possible (so Cranfield 1975; Käsemann 1980; Moo 1996).

to continue his pioneer missionary work (Rom 15:24, 28). Paul introduces his prayer with a solemn oath (*God . . . is my witness*) by which Paul attests the truth of what he is saying (2 Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20; Phil 1:8). He wants the Romans to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he continually holds them up in prayer. By adding the further description that he *serve[s] (God) with [his] whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son*, he places these prayers in the larger arena of his service to God. *Serve* is a particularly strong verb used in the LXX (Greek Old Testament) for worshipful service to God. Paul's preaching the Gospel as well as his prayer life were aspects of his worship. He did it all for the glory of God. What a model for us Paul provides! His activity and his prayer life were at all times focused upon God; what he did and how he prayed were alike aspects of his worship.

Paul moves from the general to the concrete in verses 9-10. Generally, he prays for them constantly. This is emphasized by two terms, *constantly* and *at all times*. This means not that he prayed at every moment but rather that he regularly held them up before the Lord. For us it could mean a prayer journal to help us not to forget others. Specifically, he prayed that the *way may be opened* for him to visit the Roman church. Yet he recognizes that he can only come if it is *God's will*. This does not mean that Paul was hesitant or tentative in his plans, as some have said. Rather, it recognizes the sovereignty of God in all such endeavors. Paul is trusting the Lord for the privilege of visiting Rome soon.

The purpose of this visit is specified in verses 11-12. Paul's desire is to *impart . . . some spiritual gift* to them. It is difficult to know for certain what Paul means by this. Are those general spiritual gifts as in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12 (Barrett 1957:25, but those are always given by Christ, not Paul) or Paul's own apostolic gifts, namely, his doctrinal teaching as seen in this letter (Stott 1994:57) or the gift of the gospel to the Gentiles (Schreiner 1998:54)? Or does Paul mean it more generally as a "blessing or benefit" to be given by God through himself

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**1:9** This is literally "in my spirit," and it could mean "in prayer" (Cranfield 1975:77, as Paul's inward activity), the Holy Spirit (Fee [1994:485-86] says it is the Holy Spirit at work in Paul's spirit), or Paul's wholehearted service to God (Michel 1966:46-47;

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