

Introduction

Epistles, Paul, and the New Testament

Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are classified as Epistles or letters. This literary style was an adaptation of an ancient Greco-Roman tradition that has its origin in official military and government communication. (Ezra and Nehemiah provide adequate examples of each.) Letter writing became more common with the introduction of Papyrus paper, but primarily only for the rich who could afford personal servants by whom the letters were delivered. The Post Office had yet to be invented.

Epistles were exclusively a by-product of previously established personal relationships (family and friends). Each letter had one, two, or possibly all of three purposes. The first purpose was that of conveying basic, necessary information. A certain amount of information needed to be conveyed from person to person or from superior to subordinate and telephones and email were not yet invented. Second, letters were meant to make a request of a social superior or to give commands to a subordinate. Generals gave orders through letters just as soldiers asked for permission through them. A third purpose or reason for epistles was for the maintenance and development of personal relationships. Friends and family communicated through letter, just as they do today.

Epistles of antiquity were composed of three parts – greeting, body, closing. The letter's greeting and closing were primarily concerned with personal correspondence and relationship development. The body, however, was the place where instruction and information was communicated, which is especially the case in the Epistles of the Bible. A lengthy body indicated that there was tremendous amount of information and/or instruction needed. But, letters that were primarily intended for the building of personal relationships contained a very small, sometimes non-existent, body and a lengthy greeting and closing.

Paul's epistles were more about instruction rather than personal relationships, and thus were predominately body. Interestingly, most of his letters specifically dealt with unique issues within individual congregations. Romans is the exception. It is a Christian Manifesto, most likely written between the end of 55 AD and the beginning of 57 AD, after Paul's visit to Jerusalem with the gift of the Gentile congregations (Rom. 15:25; Acts 24:17).

Throughout Church History, much has been made of the beginnings of the Roman congregation. Tradition has maintained that the church was originally begun by Peter. However, this is simply not the case as is evidenced by the facts that the faith of the Romans was well-known (1:8), and Paul desired to visit them for some time. Visitors from Rome were among those present on the day of Pentecost. These visitors would have most certainly taken the good news of the gospel back to Rome. In 49 AD Claudius expelled the Jews for rioting about "Chrestus" (Christ), according to Roman historian Suetonius. Given this evidence, it is quite possible and even likely that the church had no direct and specific experience with apostolic ministry.

Romans, specific

Romans is Paul's grandest, fullest and most comprehensive statement of the gospel. Luther, Augustine and Wesley all spoke of the Epistle's importance in their conversion to Christ. All the Reformers, in fact, saw Romans as the God given key to understanding all of Scripture. In this great work Paul brings together the following themes among others: sin, law, judgment, human depravity, human destiny, justification, faith, works, grace, sanctification, election, the plan of salvation, the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the nature and life of the church, the Christian hope, the purposes of God, and the will of God. As a result the study of Romans is essential for growth and development in the life of the believer.¹

A Brief Overview is as follows:

1. The Wrath of God (1:18-3:20)
2. The Grace of God (3:21-8:39)
3. The Plan of God (9-11)
4. The Will of God (12:1-15:13).²

Paul, the Peacemaker

The Roman Church was a mixed community. At its inception, the church primarily consisted of Jewish converts who most probably brought the good news back to Rome from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during Pentecost, as noted above. As the congregation grew, however, more and more Gentiles who were originally sympathetic to Judaism converted unto Christianity and therefore balanced the church's populace between Jews and Gentiles. By the time the Jewish believers returned from Claudius' expulsion (approximately 54 AD), the church was a predominately Gentile congregation.

With the increased Gentile presence came a shift in theological doctrine away from the tenants of Judaism, which was accelerated with Claudius' expulsion of the Jews. As one may imagine, the return of the Jews initiated a divisive clash of theological viewpoints, which primarily revolved around two issues: the status of God's covenant, law, and salvation and the definition of God's people. Members of the congregation were required to side with one side or the other. The Jewish Christians viewed Christianity as part of Judaism (an extension) and thus required the strict observance of Jewish-law in addition to the very gracious tenants of Christianity. Salvation, in other words, was by grace plus works (faith in Christ and adherence to Jewish custom), defining the people of God

¹ The above material is gleaned from *The Reformation Study Bible* introductions to the Epistles and Romans.

² John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 36-43.

ethnically. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, preferred a completely “law-free”³ gospel and religion that defined God’s people as all of those possessing faith in Christ.

Paul, therefore, had a specific purpose (among others) for writing to this quarrelling congregation. The Roman Christians needed a peacemaker, and the Apostle Paul was the man for the job. He had a unique position, one that would serve him well in his role of mediator to which he had been called. Paul was a strong Jew with a pedigree that would have impressed the most pious Jewish convert. By his own admission he was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6). He also had a special commission to the Gentiles as he frequently referred to himself as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13). This divine calling and love for Gentiles would certainly have bound him to any who possibly would have thought himself unworthy of an apostle of Jewish descent.

If Paul was the man for the job, then how did he accomplish his task? He addresses both parties by asserting that guilty sinners are justified by God’s grace alone in Christ alone (irrespective of any status or works) and by redefining the people of God according to faith not descent, circumcision, or culture. Justification for the sinner is only accomplished through faith in Christ on account of the work of Christ on the cross. Any assertion of, or dependence upon, the works of men stands in complete contradiction to the glorious truth of the gospel (Romans 1:18-5:21). Gentiles did not need to adhere to the strict laws of Jewish practice. Therefore, sinners are released from the Law as the way unto salvation but, in the same vein, are enabled to fulfill it through the power of the Holy Spirit as the revelation of God’s holy will (Romans 6-8).⁴ God’s people, then, are redefined as those who possess faith in Christ alone. Jews and Gentiles are united as the people of God as a result of the shift from descent, culture, and circumcision to faith in Christ as the defining characteristic of God’s holy people. Abraham’s children now encompass all of those with faith in Christ. Paul’s in-depth discussion of these two issues served to humble the disputing parties and unify them in the gospel of grace.

Secondarily, Paul had several other reasons for writing to the Romans. He desired to use Rome as a base for further ministry. His plans were simple. A visit to Jerusalem, for which he sought prayer (Romans 15:30), was in order so that Gentile aid may be taken to the struggling Jewish church. He, then, was to travel across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome for a brief visit of refreshment and preparation for further ministry to the unconverted Gentiles of Spain, a journey which he never made. The church had to be

³ The theological term for this “law-free gospel” is *Antinomianism*. This position argues that the Christian is free to live life in whatever manner he/she so chooses regardless of God’s demands for righteousness. Or, to put it more simply, the Christian is free to sin because God’s grace is a license to do so: since grace abounds infinitely, then Christians can sin abundantly and still be saved. This, of course, is unbiblical at its very core, especially seeing that God commands believers to live unto holiness (1 Peter 2:13-19). For more on Antinomianism, please see R.D. Linder, “Antinomianism,” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 70-72.

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of Romans, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. John Stott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 35.

prepared for this visit especially because he had never visited them, and the church had no prior knowledge of him.

Consequently, he made three specific requests of the Romans. First, as has been previously mentioned, Paul asked for particular prayer for his trip to Jerusalem. The Jewish church in general was hostile toward Gentile converts. Since Paul had the explicit calling as the “apostle to the Gentiles,” he was concerned about his reception in Jerusalem. The aid from Gentile congregations was undoubtedly a peace offering as it demonstrated the Gentile concern for the Jewish believers. Second, Paul asked for support of his mission to Spain, a mission that developed out of his sincere conviction to preach Christ where no one else had preached so as not to build on anyone else’s foundation (Romans 15:20). Travel and other expenses would certainly be accrued and must be met. He needed Roman support financially as well as prayerfully. And third, he asked them to be generous in their reception of him upon his arrival in the Imperial city.