

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS (from the Anabaptist Community Bible)

By Lareta Finger

Written in 56 or 57 CE, Paul's longest letter is situated in two contexts: that of Paul and that of his recipients in Rome (see Romans 15:14-16:23). Paul wrote from Corinth in Greece, not far from the seaport of Cenchreae, where his co-worker Phoebe was a deacon of the church (16:1). Phoebe took Paul's letter by ship to Rome, 800 miles to the west. From previous missionary experiences, Paul knew a number of believers in Rome (16:3-16), including Priscilla (or Prisca) and Aquila, whom he had met in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3).

Jews had been brought forcibly to Rome between 50 and 40 BCE. Many religious and political tensions had existed between them and Rome's citizens, and no central authority existed among the Jewish synagogues there. This loose organization may be why Rome became the first city on the western Mediterranean region where Christianity took hold. The result was increasing conflict, especially between the Jewish followers of Jesus who accepted Gentiles into their cell groups and the more conservative groups who prioritized law observance.

During the late 40s, Jews rioted publicly because of their differing beliefs about Christ. In reaction, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews, both traditional and Christian, from Rome in 49 C.E., leaving behind Gentile believers. This explains Paul's encounter with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth.

After Claudius's edict lapsed in 54 CE, many Jews—including Priscilla and Aquila—returned to Rome under Emperor Nero. Theological conflicts escalated quickly. Although most of Paul's letter to the believers in Rome addresses conflicts about Jewish law and the centrality of Jesus, Paul also desired to proclaim Christ to Gentiles in Spain (15:22-29). Not knowing Latin, he hoped for help for the Roman Christians, even though no Jews lived in Spain at that time. Although Paul never got to Spain, his Jesus-gospel was truly universal!

Central Themes

Paul's letter to the Roman Christians was primarily a speech to be performed orally, since most people in the empire could not read well, if at all. Probably Phoebe herself went from one house church or cell group to the next, delivering Paul's impassioned message.

After Paul's introduction and thanksgiving "for *all* of you" (1:8), Paul's thesis statement clearly names his gospel of radical inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles (1:16-17). Although the

good news of Jesus has reached Jews first, it is equally for Gentiles. *All* are called to live faithfully for God.

The speech can be divided into four major sections, or proofs, of his thesis. In 1:18-32, Paul begins with a tirade against Gentile sins. In 2:1-29, he makes the theological case for God's impartiality, then sharply criticizes the Jews for assuming superiority over Gentiles.

Although they were "trusted with God's revelations (3:2), both Jews and non-Jews are *equally* under the power of sin (3:9-20). Only through Jesus Christ's faithfulness to God can both Jews and Gentiles be made righteous. Since all have sinned equally, they are offered grace as a gift (3:21-31). Paul names Abraham's faithfulness to God as an example of how it works (4:1-25).

Chapters 5-8 offer the second proof that all believers come to God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and not through law. The reality of human sin is clearly a struggle; sin has been in the world since Adam. But now grace has come through Jesus Christ (ch. 5). You have been freed from sin and raised to newness of life, writes Paul. So act like it! (ch. 6).

Paul uses the analogy of marriage. Just as a woman is free to remarry after her husband dies, believers who have died to the law can now live in the new life of the Spirit. Yet Paul recognizes the inner conflict between doing good and doing evil (ch. 7). The high point of the full Romans speech is found in Paul's encouragement in Romans 8 to live in the power of God's Spirit.

The third section, Romans 9-11, addresses the current plight of Israel: if God extended grace to them, why did they not receive it? Paul concludes that they had "unenlightened zeal," which prioritized law observance over understanding God's love and grace. Yet a remnant of Jew indeed accepted grace, and through them, the gospel has been brought to Gentiles. Ultimately, all Israel will be saved (ch. 11). The fourth section—12:1 to 15:13—asks the ethical question. How then shall we live? Paul draws from many sources, including Jesus' teachings, wisdom literature, and Hebrew law. With the Gentile mission central, his hope is that Israel can fulfill its destiny to be a blessing to the whole world.

In 15:14-16:27, Paul concludes with hopes of visiting Rome and sends personal greetings to many friends and co-workers.

Anabaptist Lens

What is "*faith*"? Romans 3:1-28 is sometimes called "the heart of Romans"—salvation by faith alone. But the word "faith" (Gk. *pistis*) has too often been interpreted merely as an abstract belief,

as something that is more important than “works,” or how believers live their lives. The original context, however, makes clear that *pistis* also means “faithfulness.” In 1:22, we see that “God’s righteousness comes *through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ* (emphasis added). In addition, the only contrast Paul makes between “faith” and “works” is faithfulness to Jesus versus works of the law (3:28 NIV et.al.), such as circumcision, food laws, and so on.

In 1525, the early Anabaptists challenged Martin Luther on this very issue, calling for a life conformed to the pattern of Jesus as *faithful* to God. In Romans, it is much more accurate and “faithful” to Paul’s meaning if we think of “being faithful” rather than saying “I believe.”

An extended ethical emphasis. The necessary complement to Paul’s theology in Romans 1-11 is his practical application of it in chapters 12-15. When it comes to doing good to one’s enemies, Paul sounds as radical as Jesus in the Gospels!

Submit to governing authorities? Paul’s call to be subject to the Roman government (13:1-7) may strike a dissonant chord for Anabaptists, who for over five centuries have resisted unjust laws or sought for other ways to submit. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, Emperor Nero had just begun his reign and was still a teenager under the control of wiser advisors. With growing political conflict between the Jewish communities in Rome concerning Jesus’ gospel and Gentile inclusion, it made sense for Paul to call for submission to the political authorities. The previous edict of Jewish expulsion had lapsed, and Paul did not want another crackdown.

Openness to Jewish people. Paul was a Jew and was never ashamed of his religious background. After he encountered Jesus in a vision, Paul incorporated Jesus as the Messiah into his overall theology. As Anabaptists own their history of interpreting the Hebrew Bible, they should identify in every way possible with these common roots. Antisemitism is not Anabaptist!

Religious legalism. Anabaptists as a whole need to confront a tendency to divide and cause conflict over cultural issues. In this respect, many Anabaptists have been like conservative Jews in Rome who would not accept Gentiles into their synagogues without their observance of Jewish law and practices. Paul’s call in Romans 14 to welcome others and not judge them for matters of lifestyle or for seeming “weak in faith” must be taken seriously.