

Romans: Kingdom through Covenant, Part 1

by David Orton

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The question will be asked, why another commentary on Romans?

First, because Romans provides the ABC's of the Gospel, it is Christianity 101. From the early church to the present day, it has been recognised as the foundational teaching of Christianity, providing the Bible's most complete statement concerning God's purpose for humankind, its fall from that purpose, and his programme for its restoration.

Second, because the church is the product of the Gospel, as revealed especially by Christ to Paul (refer to my series, [The Pauline Correspondence](#)). The church is the *wineskin* but the Gospel is the *wine*, with the former serving and being shaped by the latter. We make a mistake to imagine that reforming the wineskin (church structures & ministry modes) without reforming the Gospel (i.e. our version of it) will bring kingdom increase. Working backwards, this means that if there is a problem with the church (i.e. division & competition, moral implosion of clergy and people, spiritual decline, cultural impotence, doctrinal error, etc.), there is a problem with the Gospel, or at least our version of it.

Third, because this commentary will attempt to provide a needed corrective. It will address the oft-myopic view that Justification is the epicentre of Romans, its dominant theme. Certainly, Justification is momentous in Romans and in the believer's life, it is strategic as the foundation of the whole redemptive economy and, thus, Paul's Gospel. But it is merely the part not the whole, the hinge on which swings God's renovation of the cosmos. Nonetheless, the focus on the part as the whole – man's Justification – has produced a man-centred and dysfunctional gospel.

Fourth, because this commentary will, rather, show that the architectonic scheme of Paul's Gospel is covenantal. It is within the covenant schemata of Scripture that Justification finds its place. It is the means by which God's covenant justice (judgement) is met in Christ and man declared righteous before God. Covenant provides the governing paradigm of God's dealings with mankind and his purpose for the world. Indeed, the covenant is the legal constitution of God's government of the world; hence, God's kingdom comes through covenant. It therefore provides the whole structure to Paul's thought and teaching in Romans.

Fifth, and finally, because Paul's Gospel, as expounded to the Romans, serves as the divine manifesto for the renewal of the cosmos: the renewal of mankind as God's image-bearer and of his original creation mandate. This takes redeemed man from *personal renewal to cultural reformation*—from individual regeneration and justification to corporate and cultural dominion, fulfilling God's original mandate for humanity and the world. Romans is the definitive declaration of the Gospel of God's Kingdom—of God's foreordained purpose for the world and his intervention to bring it to pass in time-space history.

Occasion & Purpose

The occasion is one thing but the purpose another.

Occasion

The occasion of the epistle is Paul's imminent visit to Rome. The plan is to visit en route to Spain and thus receive help for the mission further westward (1:8-16a; 15:24, 28). And in so doing, receive mutual benefit as he imparts to them a spiritual gift (1:11-12). He wishes to reap a harvest among them as with the rest of the Gentiles (1:13). Additionally, Paul needed to address certain internal community issues (ch. 14).

While there is no apostolic founder of the church in Rome, Paul's epistle and visit is wrapped within what appears to be his apostolic *association* with the church. This can be deduced severally as: 1) he does not "boast in the labours of others" (2 Cor 10:15) nor "build on some one else's foundation" (15:20); and 2) moreover, numerous members of the church are intimates of the Pauline circle: - Priscilla and Aquila who had previously travelled and served with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4, 18) and

Ephesus (Acts 18:19, 24-26; 1 Cor 16:19), and now in Rome (Rom 16:3-4); Phoebe from Cenchreae, the port of Corinth, who is delivering the letter (Rom 16:1); and Andronicus and Junia (16:1ff) et al, 29 intimates in all. The church in Rome clearly falls within Paul's sphere of influence and relationships.

Purpose

First, Paul's primary purpose is to prepare for the global expansion of the Gospel westward; and thus, for the ingathering of the nations, the 'fullness of the Gentiles' (Rom 11:25). Perhaps the most epochal turning point of Paul's whole missionary endeavour occurred at the forbiddance of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And, in fact, as they sought to turn eastward to Bithynia they were again resisted by the Spirit and instead, Paul receiving through a vision the Macedonian call, turned westward to Greece and beyond (Acts 16:6-10; 19:21). On this, hinged the whole future unfolding of world history. Europe and the British Isles were thus evangelized and Christianized, providing the base for the Gospel's missionary expansion to the whole earth. As the centre of the empire, Rome was a strategic base in the Holy Spirit's trajectory westward, as had been Ephesus and Antioch in the east.

As Paul writes to the Romans, he can testify that the Spirit of God has worked through him, "so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum [eastern Adriatic] I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ" (Rom 15:19-24; 2 Cor 10:16). And thus, he is ready to preach in those regions where Christ is not named, so as not to build on another's foundation. After 20 years of apostolic expansion of the Gospel, and now on his third missionary journey (Acts 20-21), he writes to Rome in a 3-month layover in Corinth, so as to prepare the way for the advance of the Kingdom of God westward to the nations. The time of writing is most likely the winter and early spring of AD 55-56.

This expansionary purpose thus determines the thrust and content of his epistle. In his maturity he now sets forth the Gospel for Christian posterity, laying the foundation for the growth of God's Kingdom throughout the nations. The clear global mandate of Paul's apostleship underlines Romans as the most significant piece of literature for world history, for the fulfilment of God's 'earth purpose' (Acts 22:6-21; 26:12-20; Rom 1:1-6; Gal 1:11-2:10). In fact, he considers his apostolic role as so epochal in the harvest of the Gentiles he views it as an offering up of a priestly sacrifice (Rom 15:15-16) in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of the 'New Heavens and the New Earth'—the new creation:

And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord

"For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain."

Isaiah 66:19-22

Therefore, as previously explained, while Justification is foundational, it is not the epicentre of Romans. Rather it is God's 'earth purpose', his original design for humankind in Adam, now restored in Christ (Rom 5:12-21). And so, as stated, the architectonic structure of Romans is covenantal; from Adam to Christ, God deals with humankind through covenant relationship. Consequently, Paul sets forth the Gospel as the revelation of God's righteousness (Rom 1:17) as a covenant category and covenant status (i.e. justification) as declared by grace through faith (Rom 3-4); thus correcting the Jew's misconstrual of their covenant identity (Rom 2), of the law's purpose (Rom 3, 7), and of their election (Rom 9-11).

Consequently, the Gospel (*euangélion*), a word not only with OT roots but also pagan (used in the emperor cult as the proclamation of a new world order in the advent of Caesar Augustus), proclaims Christ as Lord over the totality of human existence, and more particularly, the pretensions of the messianic Roman state. Rome practiced religious tolerance to the degree religious cults bowed to the supremacy of the emperor, and this the Christians could not do. Either Christ or Caesar was lord. And so, the Gospel was proclaimed in the face of the totalitarian state's claim to godhood, becoming the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16), not only personally but also culturally. Paul's Epistle to the Romans is thus the explication of 'his Gospel' (Rom 2:16; 16:25) – received by direct revelation from the ascended Christ (Gal 1:11-12) – as the proclamation of the new world order in the advent of Christ as the Lord of all lords. A new epoch of human history has begun, in fact, the climax

of all that had been promised in ages past by the prophets in the Scriptures (Rom 1:2).

Second, Paul's subordinate purpose in writing to the Romans is to launch a pre-emptive strike against the Judaizers, those "who create obstacles contrary to the doctrine" (Rom 16:17), that is, requiring Gentile believers to rely on the Jewish boundary markers of circumcision, food laws, and sabbaths in addition to their faith in Christ. Their identity is indicated by Paul's request for prayer to be delivered from the "unbelievers in Judea" so that he will be free to visit them (Rom 15:30-32); they are the "circumcision party" that also disturbed the Galatian believers (Gal 2:12). The Judaizers have, in fact, dogged Paul's heels all the way from Judea around to Corinth where their plotting precipitated his early departure and return to Jerusalem to deliver the Macedonian gift, terminating his 3-month sojourn in Greece (Acts 20:3; Rom 15:25). Knowing that their modus operandi was to follow his labours, sowing discord and confusing the Gospel, Paul wrote to Rome to set forth and establish the proper relationship of Israel and the law to God's purpose for the Gentile world (Rom 2-4; 9-11). He specifically confronts the Jewish abstraction of the law, separating the law of God from the God of the law, from the intimate and personal knowledge of God (Rom 10:2-8), as a means of self-justification. But he also pre-empts any Gentile boasting (Rom 11) and antinomianism (i.e. anti-law position that claims, 'we are no longer under law but under grace', misconstruing the relationship of Law and Gospel), reinstating the law as an agency of covenant obedience to the living God (Rom 3:31; 7:7-16; 8:3-8; 13:8-10). While God never designed law for our justification, it was designed for our sanctification, our holy living and obedience to him. Furthermore, it is integral to civil justice (Rom 13:1-7).

Outline & Structure

Outline

The Epistle to the Romans has been variously outlined. As with most of Paul's epistles the first half is doctrinal and the second half practical:

Doctrinal (ch. 1-11);
Practical (ch. 12-15);
Personal (ch. 16).

Another simple outline of the epistle's argument demonstrates:

The Problem of Human Sin and God's Righteousness (ch. 1-4);
The Solution of God's Righteousness to Sin and the Law (ch. 5-8);
The Problem of Israel's Sin and God's Righteousness (ch. 9-11);
The Application of God's Righteousness (ch. 12-16).

For the purpose of this commentary we will outline the epistle thus:

Purpose & Theme: Caesar & Christ - *Gospel Declared* (1:1-17)
God Revealed & Man Judged: *Covenant Disobeyed* (1:18-1:32)
Judgement & Justification: *Justice Promised* (2:1-4:25)
De-Creation & Re-Creation: *Paradise Restored* (5:1-8:39)
Disobedience & Dispossession: *Covenant Administered* (9:1-11:36)
Autonomy & Theonomy: *Covenant Obeyed* (12:1-15:14)
Personal & Cultural: *Dominion Regained* (15:14-16:27)

Structure

As already stated, the epistle is structured according to a covenant schema. This can be illustrated accordingly:

Roman's Covenant Structure (THEOS):

Transcendence (Supremacy): Romans 1:1-17
Hierarchy (Authority): Romans 1:18-11:36

Ethics (Stipulations): Romans 12:1–15:33

Oath (Sanctions): Romans 16:1-2

Succession (Continuity): Romans 16:3-27

The discovery of the five-fold covenant structure of Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties has provided a ground-breaking insight, confirming the Bible's own interpretation of the biblical covenants and their design.

A victorious king would form a treaty with his vassal king, establishing: 1) his supremacy; 2) his authority; 3) his laws; 4) his punishments and rewards; and 5) his succession.

Based on this, THEOS provides a convenient acronym: T (Transcendence); H (Hierarchy); E (Ethics); O (Oath); and S (Succession). The biblical covenants and various books of the Bible have been discovered to follow this pattern (e.g. Deuteronomy, Romans, Revelation).

With Christ as our victorious King and we his vassals, the covenant arrangement is clear: 1) he has sovereignly and graciously established covenant relationship with us (Transcendence); 2) he has established his authority in his Word and delegated it through his servants, ministers of the Gospel and ministers of the state (Hierarchy); 3) he has given his law as the standard of justice (Ethics); including, 4) penal sanctions and blessings (Oath); and finally, 5) provided for the continuity of his reign through the promulgation of the Gospel and through godly families, churches, and culture (Succession).

This is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God—the law-word of the King ruling over the whole of life, demanding a world-and-life view that is all-encompassing. God in Christ (the Word) is sovereign over the totality of human existence. Through regeneration his reign begins in self-government with a ripple-effect flowing through to all spheres of life: family, church, and culture. As the Creator-Redeemer God, he declares the world of matter as good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). And thus, is redeeming it through the power of the Gospel as a New Heavens and a New Earth—in fact, 'Paradise Restored'. This, Romans proclaims.

Translation

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