



Romans 5-8 as Pastoral Theology

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The unity and functions of the exhortation and assurance in Romans 5-8 are clarified when the section is understood as pastoral theology. From shared foundational commitments, Paul responds to problems facing Christians in Rome. Specifically, he addresses the existential reality of suffering and sin. Paul faces these problems from a confident stance in grace. His purpose is to confirm his readers in that same stance and thereby aid them in their specific difficulties.

I. THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS

An intense and fruitful scholarly debate about Paul's purpose in Romans shows us that the letter cannot be read simply as a general, systematic presentation of his theology. Romans, like all the other Pauline letters, is tied to particular historical contexts—the author's, the addressees', and the relationship between the two. Paul's own context includes his controversial work among gentiles and his teaching about freedom from the law, his impending trip to Jerusalem with a collection and thence to Rome, and the likelihood that he felt his life's work would soon be completed. Most of Paul's letters are largely influenced by the persons to whom he writes. In the case of Romans, scholars disagree whether Paul knows little, something, or much about the situation in Rome.

Minimally, in considering the purpose of Romans, we may be sure that the letter addresses Christians and that it responds to real problems. Whether or not Paul knew much of the actual situation in Rome, he would have assumed that believers there faced problems similar to those of believers elsewhere—the struggle with sin, suffering, and unbelief, practical relations between Jewish and gentile Christians, and regulation of life in the community. That is our first certainty: Paul assumed the problems addressed were real for believers. The second certainty is that the intended readers were, in fact, believers. Though Romans almost certainly speaks to and about unbelievers, this is done hypothetically and

for the benefit of the Christian reader. Paul wrote to Christians and sought to reaffirm what they knew and believed—to strengthen—not to convert. Both these certainties are relevant to the suggestion that Romans 5-8 be read as pastoral theology. Paul intended to bring the illumination of the gospel into Christians' everyday lives.

Letters are generally substitutes for face-to-face encounters, and this is certainly true of Romans. Paul hoped to come to Rome to preach the gospel, but for the moment he sent a letter with the same evangelical purpose.¹ In stating the purpose of his planned visit (1:8-13), Paul

acknowledged the Romans' faith. The same must be said of the whole letter. It has many characteristics of the type of argument the ancient rhetoricians called demonstrative or epideictic.² In such works the writer or speaker intends to lead the audience toward stronger adherence to certain truths which they already share. In Romans Paul aims to make possible that sort of deepened commitment by addressing the readers' actual situation. His purpose is pastoral. Romans was written to nurture those who already believed.

II. SUFFERING AND SINNING AS THE OCCASION

Questions of a writer's purpose must be answered by attention to what is said. Romans 5-8 makes it quite clear that Paul's purpose there was to address existential problems.³ Understandable interest in Paul's theological views has often led commentators and preachers to treat this material as though Paul discussed topics like the law as abstract theological problems. Paul's concern here is with the twin problems of suffering and sinning. These experiences were problematic because they seemed to contradict convictions such as those stated in 1:16 and 4:24-25.

Suffering is mentioned first. In 5:1-2 Paul begins with a great affirmation of peace and hope. Immediately he moves on to acknowledge the negative reality which heightens the affirmation: "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings (*thlipseis*)" (5:3). Paul is facing this reality when he asserts "...hope does not disappoint us" (5:5). That verse seems to allude to a Psalm, 22:5 or 25:3, which expresses assurance in the face of real suffering. Paul's expression of confidence is concrete, not abstract. The same is true when he returns to the theme of suffering in 8:18-39. He cites realistic experience as foils for his confidence: "the sufferings (*pathemata*) of this present time" (8:18), "in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought" (8:26), "tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword" (8:35).

¹Nils A. Dahl, "The Missionary Theology in the Epistle to the Romans," *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 70-88.

²Wilhelm Wuellner, "Paul's Rhetoric of Argumentation in Romans: An Alternative to the Donfried-Karris Debate Over Romans," *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl Donfried (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 152-174. Cf. George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984) 152, and Robert Jewett, "Following the Argument of Romans," *supra*, 383.

³Treating Romans 5-8 as a unit needs little defense though there is some disagreement about the beginning point of the unit—5:1, 12 or 6:1. In favor of beginning at 5:1, see the argument of Nils A. Dahl, "A Synopsis of Rom. 5:1-11 and 8:1-39," *Studies in Paul*, 88-90.

Although the language suggests concrete realities, the nature of the suffering is not fully described. The precise relation of 5:1-5 and 5:6-11 is debated, but if the latter in any sense explicates the former, it appears that suffering in 5:3 is understood partially in terms of weakness, sin, and alienation from God. The connection would suggest an experiential understanding of the latter terms. Similarly, in 8:18-39 Paul links suffering with the circumstance of being part of fallen and hopeful creation (8:19-25), with alienation from God (8:26-27), and with that which deserves condemnation (8:31-34). The list in 8:35 could refer to specific experiences such as Paul's own but is more likely intended as general or typical of the Christian life.⁴

Suffering has always troubled people of God. It seems to contradict their claim to God's favor. Paul shared this assumption and deliberately set his confidence over against suffering such

as he and other Christians had experienced. Though we cannot know whether he was thinking of specific times of persecution in Rome, we may be sure that he addressed the sorts of experience he assumed the Roman Christians also had. Perhaps the general concreteness was designed to let the readers think of their own specifics, much as today's preacher may use concrete but general examples in speaking to persons whose actual problems may be known only to themselves. The common experience of suffering is part of the occasion for what Paul writes in Rom 5:1-11 and 8:18-39.

In the larger intervening unit, Romans 5:12-8:17, sin is the existential reality confronted.⁵ As we have seen, the passages which bracket this section address a suffering which includes sin. Law, death, and condemnation are important topics, but they were significant to Paul, his readers, and his opponents because Christians still experienced sin. The sinfulness of humanity is, of course, a theme throughout Romans. After explaining his role and purpose (1:1-15), Paul states his theme (1:16-18), and then begins with an explication of the human situation without Christ. This is neatly summarized in 3:9: "all people, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin." In chapters 5-8 Paul faces the fact that Christians actually commit sins. Sin is the linking idea by which the Adam/Christ contrast is introduced in 5:12. Adam is portrayed here not as primal human but as primal sinner. Sin remains a main topic under discussion throughout (e.g., 5:12; 6:1, 15, 23; 7:7, 13, 24; 8:2, 12-13). Paul must have seen sinning as an existential problem for Christians though, of course, the matter is complex. Paul uses various terms which focus on sin as power or sin as transgressions. Sin is an element of the Christian's past (5:8, 10, 12, 16), but there is also a present inadequacy implied—salvation awaits (5:9, 10, 17, 19).

The possibility of Christians continuing to sin is apparent in Romans 6; one does not admonish against that which cannot happen. And it is Christians who sin. Paul nowhere implies that sinning is to be equated with falling from faith. Christians do sin, and that's a problem—for Paul and for others. This

⁴On suffering as the lot of the Christian, see Wayne Meeks, "The Social Context of Pauline Theology," *Interpretation* 36 (1982) 273. The list in Romans 8:35 is also similar to Paul's accounts of his apostolic difficulties (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:23-29), but the apostolic claim is apparently not emphasized here.

⁵Pauline vocabulary supports this. The various words for sin in Romans, especially those on the *hamartem* are concentrated in 5:12-8:10.

chapter is often read as though Paul were responding to objections to his theology such as the one mentioned in 3:8, "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying."⁶ However, Paul's argument in Romans 6 should not be read as a rebuttal of some who charged that his gospel promoted sinning, lawlessness. It is rather directed to any who might have been inclined to use their freedom for sinning. He addressed the sinner, not the theologian, if I may make such an artificial distinction. The problem Paul presumes here is similar to what he encountered in Corinth. It is a practical problem, not a theoretical one. He speaks not to notions about sin, but to sins. If Paul was addressing objections, they were not those of an indignant critic of Paul's theology, but rather the thoughts of typical believers puzzled or troubled by continued sin in themselves or others.⁷ We are not told why sin was considered a problem, but it would appear to conflict with the obvious sense of the assertion that God justifies, makes righteous. That could cause the believer to doubt either the assertion or its

application to a particular sinner.⁸

Chapter 7 is about the role of the law, but both by the context within 6:1-8:17 and by the content of his argument Paul reveals that sin is still the occasion for his writing. Sin dominates the law, rendering it ineffective or worse (7:8, 11, 13). Sin is discussed here both as human experience (7:5, 7, 8b, 15, 16, 19, 20a) and as a power over against the law and the person (7:8a, 9, 11, 13, 17, 20b, 23, 25). Not only law but also the person is absolved of responsibility, and the focus is placed on sin (7:7, 13, 17).

The debate whether 7:13-25 speaks about the pre-Christian or the Christian situation will never be settled to everyone's satisfaction. While I agree with those who read this as Paul's description of the life he and other Christians live, it is not necessary to hold that position in order to see that the section addresses the problem of sin.⁹ Is the Christian free from sin? In 7:25 Paul leaves no doubt, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" But, even if chapter 7 does not speak of a Christian experience of sin, it is closely tied to chapter 6 where believers are clearly susceptible. Romans 7 points to sin's power and the ineffectiveness of the law and concludes with the assurance of victory over sin. In 8:1-17 these themes are woven together. Sin is still the topic under discussion. Sinning is incompatible with life in the Spirit, and it is necessary to admonish the Christian to avoid it.

⁶For example, Calvin Roetzel, "Sacrifice in Romans 12-15," 414, below; and N. A. Dahl, "Missionary Theology," 84.

⁷The form of the argument at 6:1-2, 15, objections and false conclusions, reflects a diatribal teaching technique rather than actual objections to Paul's preaching. Stanley Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Chico, California: Scholars, 1981) 148-154.

⁸It has often been suggested that various parts of Romans are written to vindicate God, for example, in the face of continued unrighteousness or the unbelief of the Jews. Theodicy is part of Paul's purpose in this letter, but that does not appear to be the main point in Romans 5-8. There the focus is anthropological.

⁹J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 107, usually gives careful consideration to context but seems to fail on this unit, calling it "an apology of the law."

The existential question behind Romans 5-8 is, "How are we Christians to live with the reality of suffering and sin?"¹⁰ Paul's response to the problem is pastoral. He uses theology and experience to assure and admonish.

III. THE STANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN

Romans 5:2 speaks of a *stance* in grace, and the word is useful in describing how Paul argues in this section. In speaking pastorally to the Romans, Paul works from a stance in Christ "through whom we have obtained access to this grace *in which we stand*." This stance is an attitude in both the sense of position or orientation and of mood or feeling. It involves the experience of the whole person. "Peace with God" in 5:1 suggests both full reconciliation or compatibility and the contentment or comfort which could accompany that. The words in 5:2-5 translated as "rejoice," "boast," "endurance," "character," "confirmation" and "hope" similarly have objective and subjective components. Romans 8:38 should read, "For I am confident..." and this clause too points to a complete orientation of the person. Throughout the section, even where such words are not used, Paul's stance is confident and assured—the believer stands in a

right relationship with God.¹¹ Like faith, to which it is closely linked, this stance is itself evidence of God's power, not human effort.

It was a standard rhetorical method in the ancient world, as it is today, to assume the emotion or stance which one wished the audience to take.¹² Paul does this, for example, by speaking confidently about himself and his God-given role when he wants his readers to grant him authority (e.g., Rom 1:16; 2 Cor 3:4, 12; 4:1, 7, 13). It was common also in political oratory for the speaker to exude confidence in the nation or prince for whose cause support was sought, or to express disgust or doubt about one who was opposed.

In Paul's confident stance there is also something of the teacher/student relationship which is always part of Paul's apostolic self-understanding, "Become as I am. Imitate me." In chapters 6-7, when he responds to possible false conclusions, he uses the pedagogical style of the diatribe.¹³ Demonstrative oratory, in general, is associated with an intent to instruct. In the opening and closing portions of this unit, Paul implies to his readers that they share his stance. He uses first person plural verbs and pronouns in 5:1-5 and in 8:31-39, except for "I am confident" (*pepeismai*) (8:38) which also invites the reader to identify with the writer. Frequently Paul cites the knowledge he shares with the Roman Christians (e.g., 5:3; 6:6, 9; 7:14; 8:22, 28).

¹⁰Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 1-7, 131, rightly objects to reading Romans 1 as though Paul were answering the question, "How am I to find a gracious God?" But this section is not adequately understood if one ignores the problem of sin and focuses only on the question of how the Gentiles have a right to share in God's promises.

¹¹Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975-79:1.255) "The fact of our peace with God should be regarded as the subject which gives the section as a whole its unity." With a somewhat similar insight, J. Beker, *Paul*, 78, refers to the "confessional character of this section. He describes it as "the Christian community celebrating its new life in Christ."

¹²W. Wuellner, "Paul's Rhetoric," 163-164.

¹³S. Stowers, *Diatribes*, 152-153.

Paul intends his argument throughout these chapters to strengthen the Romans for a confident, Christian stance over against difficulty. Like other examples of demonstrative rhetoric, this letter intends to reaffirm and reinforce the ethos of its audience. The ethos of the Christians is the tone and substance of the group's entire range of values, notably including trust in God and obedience to God's will. Ethos and world view interpenetrate and lend authority to each other.¹⁴ How God is understood influences the nature and depth of the believer's trust and obedience. And one's effective experience in trust and obedience affects how one views God. "Ought" and "is" are inseparable. Thus in Romans 5-8 Paul can argue toward his goal of intensified commitment to the faith both by declarative assurances of what God has done and by admonitions about what God's people will do. The power of this text is its potential to reaffirm convictions which the reader already holds. That reaffirmation is seen by Paul as the answer to the problems of suffering and sinning.

Paul's argument aims to strengthen group identity. He seeks to confirm the Romans in their Christian stance by citing shared experience and shared beliefs. He uses familiar language which incorporated common values and perceptions.¹⁵ Drawing the community more closely together in its understanding and expression is a means of addressing the difficulties they would

experience.

Paul refers to shared experiences both positive and negative. As we have seen, he acknowledges the reality of suffering and sin. He does not explain these away or play them down. Indeed, this negative experience is the occasion for his writing. Sin and suffering, the readers would know, do not belong to the new aeon, so the continued experience of these is troubling. Paul's argument both reinforces that perception—such experiences are alien to God's will—and helps the reader face these by putting them in perspective. Paul shows that the gospel, with its pattern of dying and rising, can acknowledge the evil without losing its power or promise.

Positive experiences of God's power are also data for Paul's argument. In 6:3-11 the fact of baptism is the basis for reminding the readers of its significance, with the familiar language of death and life. The experience of the Spirit is cited as the basis for confidence about one's stance with God: "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (5:5). "When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is the Spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:15b-16). It is apparently also actual experience of the Spirit that Paul uses in 8:23, 26 to set against negative experiences—groaning with creation and inability to communicate with God. Paul says, in effect, "Yes, you have negative experiences, but the experience of God's power in baptism and the Spirit is confirmation of your true status and hope." These powerful symbols focus the community on the nature and source of its identity.

¹⁴J. H. Schütz, "Ethos of Early Christianity," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 289.

¹⁵On the function of such language, see Norman Peterson, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 18-19.

The solution Paul offers for the existential problems of sin and suffering is based, of course, in the activity of God in Christ. Frequently in this section Paul uses summary assertions of that activity or other theological statements in his persuasive effort. However one finally outlines this letter, 5:1 unavoidably reminds the reader of what proceeds—a discussion of God's new act of justification in Christ. This is the basis for the whole unit, chapters 5-8. In 5:6-11 Paul cites God's act in Christ five separate times as basis for confidence about the future. The Adam/Christ contrast in 5:12-21 reinforces the same point about the absolute significance of Christ.

The questions and responses of chapters 6 and 7 and the discussion of the Spirit's work in 8:1-17 draw out the meaning of God's "righteousing" for Christian behavior. The overthrow of sin means the opportunity for righteous living. The admonitions to acknowledge this reality are accompanied by proclamation of it in terms which must have been familiar to Paul's readers:

so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (6:4b)

Likewise, my brothers and sisters, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. (7:4)

Since the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who

raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. (8:11)

By the inclusion of these theological assertions, Paul's admonitions lose any function as law. The old age of sin and law is totally incompatible with the new age of the Spirit and righteousness. The exhortations become matters of Christian identity, reaffirming the stance in grace. They are an invitation to live in acknowledgement that reality is changed. These assertions, of course, were nothing new to the Roman Christians. Like several earlier passages, Romans 8:28 states the link between shared convictions and present circumstances: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God." The emphasis is on God's action for God's own, including the addressees. It is summed up in 8:31: "If God is for us, who can be against us!" The stance in Christ is solid, come what may. Paul uses positive experience and theological assertions to put suffering and sin in perspective.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

By citing shared experiences and familiar beliefs, Paul does not give a response to existential problems which is logically satisfying, as systematicians have long noted. But that was not his goal. Paul's purpose was pastoral, not systematic. He intended to strengthen people in their stance of faith, to reinforce the Christian ethos toward confidence and unity. Simply put, Paul saw the solution to the difficulties with sinning and suffering not in something new, like the law, but in something the believers already had—the gospel. They did not yet have full experience of God's love; salvation, eternal life awaited them. Paul showed how that lack fits in, setting over against it the word of God's past action in Christ's death and resurrection. Beneath its opposite, grace is present. The argument of

Romans 5-8 helps the reader share the confident stance and future hope which Paul had already established in the theme verse of the letter, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe" (1:16).

This section can justly be called pastoral theology, for Paul was seeking to proclaim the gospel of God's love for specific kinds of situations. The goal is maintaining and deepening faith. The problem may be sin, suffering, or doubt. The method may be moral exhortation, proclamation of grace, or explanation and clarification. All rest in the conviction that reality is rightly experienced from the God-given stance in Christ. In Romans 5-8, the gospel serves to strengthen believers for their daily lives in Christ.