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We, They, and All in Paul's Letter to the Romans[1]

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In 2016, shortly before the presidential election, Jan-Werner Müller, professor of political theory at Princeton University, published a slender book entitled *What Is Populism?* This is not a history of populist movements or even an attempt to unravel the meaning of the term as such. Instead, Müller's signal contribution is his reflection on one of the common dynamics in populist movements: their use of language about "the people." Müller observes that populism is critical of elites but that criticism is not the only or even the main feature of populism. Instead, Müller argues that populists, whatever their ideological persuasion, are antipluralist in that they identify themselves and their cohorts—and their people alone—as "the people."

Müller has no difficulty producing examples of this logic in public life:

- When George Wallace declared "segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever," he began that infamous sentence with the words, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth." (Note: "the greatest people" in his logic were the white people who agreed with him.)

[1] This essay was first delivered as the Fretheim Lecture at Luther Seminary, April 4, 2018.

Who is included in those that God is for? What are the delineations of belonging, if any, in God's realm? Paul wrestles with these kinds of issues, and others, in his Letter to the Romans, especially when he seeks to understand the nature of what God is doing in the world, an action that seems to defy our human limits.

- While Turkish president Erdogan spoke at a party congress in the context of domestic criticism, he insisted: "We are the people. Who are you?"
- During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump announced that "the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything."

Müller recognizes that there are occasions when claims that "we are the people" can be anything but populist, as when crowds gathered in the streets of East Germany in 1989 to assert their rights against an oppressive regime. But populists insist that they "alone represent the people"—"the people" being understood in moral, homogeneous terms over against "the elites."[2] In other words, the logic is that "we" are the people and "they" are not.

I will leave to others the task of assessing Müller's arguments about the crisis populism (in any form) represents for democracy. (And I note again that his book was written and indeed appeared in print *before* November 8, 2016. It is not an *ex post facto* reaction against the outcome of the presidential election.) What I want to linger over is the exclusive claim Müller identifies as endemic to populism, the claim that "we" and not "they" are the people.

To be sure, we distinguish between "us" and "them" in numerous benign ways and on a daily basis. Illustrations abound. Speaking as a Southerner, "we" all know that the plural of *you* singular is not *you* but *y'all*. Or, for a local illustration, "we" are Vikings fans; we are not among "those" Packer fans. Such differences, however heartfelt they may be, scarcely inhabit the same universe of discourse as Erdogan's chilling claim, "We are the people. Who are you?"

Although there are trivial, even charming, uses of "we" and "they," others are far more consequential. And they do not live only in the political realm. Most of you will have read—or at least read about—the so-called Nashville Statement of 2017 that addresses what is termed *biblical sexuality*. I have in mind especially article 10 of that statement, which declares it "sinful to *approve* of homosexual immorality or transgenderism." The statement continues: "such approval constitutes an *essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness*."[3] I have many friends on both (or all) sides of the discussion of Christian faith and human sexuality. My concern here is not with the disagreement about human sexuality but with the claim that those who disagree have "departed" from the Christian faith. That, it seems to me, is exactly the logic of populism as Müller defines it. "We are the Christians. Who are you?"

By now, a number of you have other examples in mind, some political, some ecclesial, some perhaps in other arenas altogether. That is all to the good, but my concern is neither with populism in the political arena nor with populism in ecclesiastical quarrels. My concern is with the underlying logic involved in invoking an approved or affirmed "we" versus a rejected "they."

[2] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 101.

[3] "Nashville Statement," The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 2017, article 10, cbmw.org/nashville-statement. Italics mine.

I have this nagging worry that our reading of Paul's letters may have contributed to this divvying up of the world into "we" and "they." I don't mean simply that Paul's texts may be cited (however well or badly) in the discussion about human sexuality or even that Paul's texts may be used (again, however well or badly) in the discussion of national issues. What I have in mind instead is the possibility that Scripture underwrites our division of the world into "we" and "they." That is, have we as Christians contributed to the problem? Worse yet, have our Scriptures made things worse? Many places in Scripture might occupy us, but I spend a lot of my time with the apostle and his letters. Specifically, I want to talk about this question of "we" and "they" in Paul's letter to congregations in Rome.

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First, let me say, as briefly as I can, the way I understand the letter situation—what scholars refer to as "the Romans debate." Along with most New Testament scholars, I assume that Romans—however distinctive and powerful and influential it is—was not written as a timeless treatise, as Paul's *magnum opus*. He wasn't writing what he thought would be *Scripture*, he was writing a letter. Like all of his letters, it was written for a particular situation. The question is, what is that situation? What prompted this letter?

We know that Paul is in Corinth, and we know that from Corinth he plans to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. From Rome he hopes to begin a new missionary endeavor in Spain, where no Christian witness has yet traveled. We know that he is worried about Jerusalem, worried that the collection will not be accepted. We also know that he hopes for support from Rome for his mission in Spain. That much we can read off the surface of chapters 1 and 15.

Something else is at stake, however. Put much too simply for the sake of time, I think that a statement in 1:15 provides us with an important clue. Paul writes that he is obliged to "proclaim the gospel to you in Rome also." We readily skip right over that line, because we know what preaching is. But Paul uses that verb *euaggelizesthai* (to declare good news) consistently for the act of preaching the gospel *where it is not yet known*. If in this passage he means simply that he's going to do a brief address on some feature of Christian faith and life, then he is departing from his usage everywhere else. To *euaggelizesthai* is to declare the news—think CNN. He has news for them, news they have not yet heard, he plans to share that news on his visit, and he is starting that news report with the letter itself.

There are at least hints that Paul is unsure about these Roman believers. Although he offers a thanksgiving for their faith, he says nothing specific except that they are known for their faith. And the thanksgiving is astonishingly brief, especially for a letter with which he hopes to build a base for his upcoming visit. He

also doesn't refer to them as an *ekklēsia* in the opening of the letter, which is odd. Only in the greetings of chapter 16 does Paul refer to the churches he is greeting.

I think Paul knows, or at least suspects, that something crucial is missing in the Christian communities at Rome. Based on the content of the letter, it appears that they understand the gospel to be God's way of including gentiles within the children of Abraham, extending the covenant to them. Some of them, especially the gentiles, appear to believe gentiles have *displaced* Jews within God's people.

I think Paul wants very much to enlarge their understanding of the gospel. While the action of God in Jesus Christ does, to be sure, include the gentiles within God's people (in no way displacing Jews), the gospel is—on Paul's reading—far larger even than finding a place for gentiles. The gospel involves a cosmic conflict between God and powers aligned against God. The gospel declares God's unwillingness to leave humanity enslaved to sin and death, God's rescue operation: delivering and re-creating humanity for rightful relationship with God.

That's much too little and much too quickly, but it will have to do for the moment.

Now, to the question of "we" and "they" in Romans.

Who Are "We" in Romans?

Let me begin with that word *we*. In Romans, the first-person plural features primarily in chapters 5–8. *We* is not found exclusively in 5–8, of course. At the beginning of the letter, Paul stands on the side of his audience with:

> we have received grace and apostleship
> we may be mutually encouraged

and also with references to "Jesus Christ our Lord" and "God our father." There are also rhetorical assertions or questions that involve the use of first person, as in the famous: "What should we say?" and "Now we know." Yet the first-person plural concentrates in chapters 5–8, beginning with the assertion at the end of chapter 4 regarding

> those of us who trust the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, Jesus who was handed over for our trespasses and raised for our rectification.

Paul goes on in 5:1–2:

> Therefore, now that we have been rectified [made right] through trust [or faith or faithfulness] we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have entrance to this grace in which we stand.

I will come back to this passage later, but for now what matters is to notice that this is a transitional statement. It's often said that Romans 5–8 is about the Christian life, but in fact 5–8 covers a lot of territory and much of it is not what we

would expect in a discussion of the Christian life. A good deal of it has to do with the conflict between sin and death on the one side and God, Christ, and the Spirit on the other—a conflict that involves humanity as partisans of one side or another.

Yet this section does include some remarkable statements about "us," as in "God's love has been poured into our hearts" (5:5) and especially in the second half of chapter 8:

> The Spirit itself testifies to our spirit that we are God's children, and if children, then heirs. Heirs of God, heirs together with Christ, since indeed we suffer together so that we are also glorified together with him. (8:16–17)

Just after writing about the Spirit's intervention on "our" behalf, Paul continues:

> We know that all things work together for good among those who love God, those who were called according to his purpose, those whom God knew in advance, whom God chose in advance to be conformed together to the image of God's son, so that he might be the first of many brothers and sisters. The ones he chose in advance, these he also called, and those he called he also rectified, and those he rectified, he also glorified.

And Paul goes on: "If God is on our side, who can be against us?" The answer he gives is "no one." For we are "supervictors" (Jewett). And finally, "Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

These are such familiar lines that we seldom pause over them. Or if we do, we worry about their abuse. "All things work together" can be reduced to a greeting-card motto that encourages people to repress their grief or outrage over loss or injustice. And the notion that God chooses in advance has led to a host of misunderstandings about what election means. Those are good worries. But however we address them, the cumulative effect of these assertions about what it means to be "us" is breathtaking.

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These texts and a few others, particularly in 2 Corinthians, have prompted a tendency in recent scholarship to find in Paul a notion of *theosis*. In the Orthodox tradition, *theosis* or sometimes *deification* refers to "becoming god," as the words themselves suggest. The best-known formulation of this concept is the ancient

claim of Athanasius, "God became man so that man might become God."[4] In American biblical scholarship, the person who has most valiantly argued for *theosis* in Paul is Michael Gorman, although he is not alone in exploring the category.[5] For Gorman, Romans is the first Christian discussion of *theosis*, by which he means "becoming like God by participating in the life of God."

I see this desire to locate *theosis* in Paul as a small piece of a larger theological anxiety about the church. Recent decades have witnessed an extraordinary emphasis in some theological circles on the nature and identity of the church. A number of works might be cited here, but perhaps the most influential and most elegant is that of the late Robert Jenson (whom I counted as a friend and from whom I learned a great deal). Early in his two-volume systematic theology Jenson writes that the terms *church* and *gospel* "mutually determine one each other. Whether we are to say that God uses the gospel to gather the church . . . or that God provides the church to carry the gospel . . . depends entirely on the direction of thought in a context."[6] Much later he contends that the church is "in God's intention antecedent to the gospel."[7]

This is a very attractive approach in a period when all around us we observe the disestablishment of American Protestantism, and when we struggle to understand how some who identify as Christian can simultaneously engage in actions that are overtly racist, misogynist, and nationalist. Recovering a strong sense of Christian identity and a clear conception of the church offers a platform for naming and for rejecting certain extremist views. There is also an ecumenical impulse in this trend that is to be welcomed, as well as a missional concern. To affirm *theosis* is to make space for Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians to come together theologically.

The question before us, however, has to do in particular with these lines of Paul in Romans about "us," especially in Romans 8. My own reading of these lines is that they are eschatological: they announce what God has set in motion, what will come to pass, but they are scarcely evidence of *theosis*. To begin with, the gospel is not, for Paul, just a set of propositions about God that we are to sign on to or reject. It is not a body of statements we believe or fail to believe. It is an event, an action. In Jesus, God has done something in the world, and that something has real consequences in human lives. It reveals things about how the world is. It changes things. It changes "us."

Does it change "us," however, in such a way that the term *theosis* or *deification* is warranted? In a sense, the answer to that question depends on how carefully you (we?) describe the term. My discomfort with the term increases when I turn to later sections of the letter, other places where we find considerable use of first-person plural. Those come in chapters 12–16, often referred to as the ethical section of the letter.

[4] *On the Incarnation* 54.

[5] Gorman cites a number of people, although I'm not sure they would all agree with him: Ben Blackwell, David Litwa, Ann Jervis, Hays, Campbell. He admits that, but still draws on them fairly indiscriminately.

[6] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–1999), 1:5.

[7] Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:168.

Paul opens that section with a replay of the "body of Christ" language he used in 1 Corinthians: "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. . . . [and so on]." This image of belonging to Christ and to one another, of having spiritual gifts, generously granted, seems to cohere nicely with *theosis*.

But then we go farther into chapter 13, where he urges that "we" "lay aside works of darkness" and "live honorably, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." Whatever Paul thinks "we" have become, we have not escaped the need for warning, for admonition, for instruction.

When we come to chapter 14, it appears that "we" are having food fights. Apparently some Roman believers (Jews as well as gentiles?) assume that Jewish dietary practice continues. For them, God permanently removed pork and shrimp from the menu, and that is that. Other Romans believers (gentiles as well as Jews?) assume that the Messiah brings the new age, the age when those practices have ceased (bring on the food!). All is well and good when the eating or abstaining is at home, but when we share meals, what goes on the common table? If I know you are a vegan, and I serve up only meat and dairy, I'm asking for conflict. And this is more than dietary preference or lifestyle; this question goes to the heart of Jewish identity in the Roman world. Paul urges that they give up judging one another:

> We all will stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . So then, each of us will give an account to God. (14:10–12)

This rich text has a lot to teach us about dealing with church conflict, and I commend it to you. For the moment, I simply want to observe that it is hard to reconcile this passage with a strong notion of either *theosis* or *deification*. If Paul believed—especially if Paul *observed*—that Christians were in fact already conformed to the image of the Son, then he would not have needed to write this section.

I should note that those who advocate for *theosis* allow for a process of growth in faith, for discipleship, for sanctification, and so on. Perhaps I'm being a touch unfair.

Here's my real concern, however, which is not with the word *theosis* or any of its alternatives. My real concern is that we may begin to hear the language about "us" as something that *belongs* to us rather than something God does in Christ, and that we begin to hear it as about "us" rather than about "them." These claims about "us" are claims about what God has done for us. But they can be transformed—wrenched—into claims about us, about our superiority. They can be distorted into claims about our difference from others. My fear is that what Paul says to strengthen "us" can be heard at the expense of others, which is far from his intention.

That leads back to my opening and larger question and perhaps to the question of intention: Does Paul in fact underwrite a notion of "us" versus

"them"? Having examined some of the "we" passages, let me turn now to the "they" of Romans.

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What about "They" in Romans?

Several passages in Romans are notable for the use of third-person plural *they* language. I want to focus on two that are most prominent in the letter's developing argument, the second half of chapter 1 and then chapters 9–11.

When I was in seminary and graduate school, Rom 1:18–32 was not an especially prominent point of discussion. In those days, the big debates were about the "center" of Paul's theology, about the law, and about Gal 3:28. But the second half of Romans 1 has emerged as a hotly disputed text almost entirely because of our own quarrels about human sexuality. Paul's disparaging remarks about the sexual activity of women with women, of men with men, funds at least some resistance to the full inclusion of LGBTQ folks in Christian community. Several things trouble me about that ongoing discussion, but one of them is the way it allows us—all of us, on whatever side of that debate—to overlook the larger dynamic of the text.

Here, Paul begins by declaring that God's wrath has been revealed; that is, the event of the gospel, the arrival of Jesus Christ as God's way of reclaiming humanity, also reveals God's unwillingness to allow humanity to go on as it has been. It reveals God's wrath.

What follows in the rest of the chapter is an account of humanity's rejection of God as God. Humanity knew about God but refused to honor God.

As a result of that refusal, God handed them over. (Notice: the origin of human sin lies with the withholding of worship.) Three times Paul repeats that formula: God handed them over to their own passions, their desires, their own corrupt mind.

God hands them over. And *then*, once they have been handed over, they engage in the actions Paul castigates, including that long list at the very end of Romans 1: wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, God-hate, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, inventions of evil, rebelliousness toward parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness.

Among the things we overlook when we are so focused on those two verses about sex is that Paul never says who "they" are. I think he is playing on Jewish stereotypes about gentile promiscuity; "everybody" knows that gentiles worship

anything and sleep with anyone. Others argue that he already includes Jews in this argument, that it reflects Adamic humanity. But we argue about the identification of "they" precisely because Paul does not tell us who "they" are. Instead, it's "those people" who act wrongly sexually. They worship things that are not God, and they act out sexually, and they lie and murder and talk back to their parents.

You know about "them": they take our jobs and they drive around in big cars and they live off welfare.

Just when Paul (or Phoebe, the reader in Rome) has the crowd in a frenzy, and don't we love being in a frenzy about other people's immorality, about "those people," he turns at 2:1. "You there"—anyone who judges—when you judge the other person, you condemn yourself, for you the judge are doing the very same things. Who do you think you are?

Suddenly, *they* becomes *you*. That switch sets the stage for much of the first half of the letter, as Paul patiently draws the audience to understand that "we" are among "those" people.

The other major place where Paul speaks of "they" is in Romans 9–11. *Immediately* following that glorious word of reassurance at the end of Romans 8, that "no created thing" can separate "us" from the love of God, Paul writes:

> In Christ I speak the truth, I am not lying. My conscience bears witness on my behalf together with the Holy Spirit. There is great and endless grief in my heart. I could wish myself cut off from Christ on behalf of my brothers and sisters, my physical kin.
>
> They are Israelites. Theirs are the adoption and the glory and covenants and law-giving and worship and promises. From them come the patriarchs and from them is Christ by virtue of flesh [birth].

This is the opening of a long and complex, even maddening, discussion that runs through chapter 11. While the scholarly debates about this passage are intense and unending, there are, generally speaking, two ways of putting the subject. For many readers of the letter, Romans 9–11 concerns Israel's "unbelief." I myself have put it that way often: Israel's Messiah has arrived, and yet Israel does not recognize him as such. What can that possibly mean?

A second way of putting the matter takes its cue from 9:6: "It is not as though the word of God has failed." On this reading, the problem is not about Israel's belief or failure to believe. The question then becomes not about Israel's faithlessness but about the possibility that God has rejected Israel. Has God turned away from the people he called into being? As Wayne Meeks so aptly put it, is God fickle? (And if so, then why should gentiles trust that fickle God?)

On either of these readings, it is interesting to observe that Israel becomes "they." Admittedly that is not consistently the case. In the beginning, Paul identifies with Israel, and later he identifies himself as evidence of a faithful remnant.

But in the center of the argument, in chapter 10, Israel is treated as "they." And in chapter 10 there is no hint that any part of Israel has recognized Jesus as

God's Messiah. Notice that at 9:30 he observes how gentiles who weren't pursuing righteousness overtook it. But then he says:

> Israel was pursuing a law of righteousness but did not arrive at the law.
> They tripped over the stone of stumbling.

He goes on to say that he pleaded to God for "their" salvation, that "they" have zeal for God even though it is an unenlightened zeal. Throughout this chapter, he speaks of Israel as if it were one large mass, a single unit. In other words, the reader is permitted throughout Romans 10 to think that Israel is a group, an it, a they. A they over there. We are looking from the outside at God's dealings with that people. Finally Paul poses the question of 11:1: "Has God rejected God's people?" The answer is a resounding no, but the answer then prompts Paul to divide up Israel into two groups: the remnant and the rest. Even here, Israel is spoken of as "they"—and this by someone who identifies as part of Israel.

As readers or hearers, we are fully in tune with this discussion about "those people" only to hit the wall of 11:13: Now I am speaking to you gentiles! It turns out that the problem is not "them" but "you."

Admittedly, the ins and outs of Romans 9–11 are enough to make the reader dizzy. Just about the time you think you see where you are going, you find yourself running into a brick wall or a locked door. But what does seem clear is Paul's conviction that God will deal with Israel in God's time, and it's not up to gentiles to worry about God's actions, much less draw a world in which Israel has been excluded from God's people! As 11:26 concludes, "All Israel will be saved."

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The Final Element: "All"

Students who encounter the Greek of Romans for the first time are often—and understandably—perplexed by it. One thing I regularly point out is that if they can master that word for *all* or *every*—*pas*, *pasa*, *pan*—they have a good start on understanding the letter.

Just in the first chapter alone, the word *all* appears six times, which is a great help for beginners.

- The obedience of faith among *all* the gentiles/nations (v. 5)
- [The letter is] for *all* those in Rome, beloved of God, called to be holy (v. 6)
- I give thanks . . . for *all* of you (v. 8)

- The gospel is God's power bringing about salvation for *everyone* who believes or trusts (v. 16)
- God's wrath is being revealed against *all* ungodliness and wrong . . . (v. 18)
- Filled with "*every* wrong act" (v. 29)

Sometimes the *all* refers to "all who believe," the people we would identify as Christians. But that is not always the case. When Paul compares and contrasts the work of Adam and Christ in 5:12–21, his argument turns on the assumption that what Adam did for all humanity (introduce sin and death into the world), Christ also did for all humanity (defeat sin and death and extend God's gifts to all). The comparison falls apart if Christ's work is only for some folks and Adam's is for everyone! Importantly, nothing in that chapter suggests that Christ's work is a first step that requires human response as a second step. All is all.

Similarly, the long argument of Romans 9–11 culminates in the declaration that "all" Israel will be saved (v. 26). Anticipating the resistance that claim would arouse—resistance both ancient and modern—Paul repeats it a few lines later, this time without reference to Israel: "God has confined all to disobedience that God might have mercy on all." All is all is all.

Here we are far removed from the logic of populism. Populism, in whatever form it may take, says that "we" are the people—we are God's people, we alone have the right to make decisions, we have the right to make judgments, we have the right to claim God's affections and mercies. Those other people over there, they differ from us and therefore they do not belong to us. They do not exist.

In Romans, we see a logic highly removed from that sort of populism, otherwise known as religious dualism. Paul does not license, underscore, or otherwise approve of any line drawn between them and us. To be sure, there are places in his letters where he warns against outsiders. But those are part of warning against immoral practices. Probably they reflect Paul's concerns that Christians avoid idolatry. His larger horizon, however, extends well beyond that sort of provisional dualism as it anticipates God's rescue of all of humanity, of all the creation, from the powers of sin and death, the very powers that delude us into thinking that we are better than those other people.

As it turns out, Romans is not about us versus them or even us and them, but about what God is doing. God's *all* is vastly larger than our pitiable efforts to delimit "us" from "them." ✠

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