

Epistle to the Romans: Explaining the Gospel of God

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Introduction and High level overview of the book

Written about AD 57, the book of Romans stands as the clearest monumental statement and expression of the Gospel ever penned by a mortal. Hale (2000; p 356.) makes it ever more so clearer when he states the following: “*Paul’s letter to the Romans is the most complete statement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.*” We heartily agree with this claim because reading through the epistle leaves one in awe and wonder at the depth of insight that the apostle Paul had in relation to Christ. Paul’s Christology is simply amazing and stands unequalled (perhaps approximated by Hebrews and to a lesser degree, Ephesians) in all the scriptures (Hunter 1954; Bruce 1981; p 178-79). The other amazing fact about this book is its systematic approach to issues relating to the state of the human heart, a depraved condition whose only hope of rescue is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Boston 1964; 59). The arguments that the apostle advances from chapter one to the end are simply staggering, although he himself occasionally digresses in wonder at the greatness of the salvation we have in Christ Jesus (e.g. Romans 11:33-36). Clearly, one can tell that the author of Romans had a clear and extremely logical mind. Yet another baffling fact is that at the time of scribing the epistle, Paul had not yet been to Rome nor had he met the entire Church in person but expressed an intention to do so (Romans 1: 13; 15:22-29). Although set up by other saints, it would appear the Church was very strategically located and as such, was extremely important to the Apostle. How he names so many individuals in Chapter 16 is beyond comprehension but none the less, this demonstrates how he valued Christian fellowship as well as taking a keen interest in the lives of other saints. According to Paul, his epistle is a tip in the iceberg and would pour out his heart when he visited them, since it had always been his ambition to preach Christ where he was not known, including at Rome. This Epistle is therefore a *must know* and read for every new creature in Christ.

In coming to open up this book, authors like Stanford E Murrell, FF Bruce, A.M. Hunter, Thomas Hale and C.S Keener (background commentary) give a solid back ground to the book and why it was written before commencing a somewhat detailed exposition of the entire book right (at least for Murrell) from Chapter one

to the end of the letter. We attempt to trace their footsteps, though at a distance, as we synthesize some of their thoughts in relation to this epistle.

Vital Importance of Romans

Any Christian worth their salt will agree that knowing Romans brings much delight to the Soul. Some have rightly dubbed it as “the liberty charter” for the Christian or something to that effect. This is true because in this one book, the entire gospel is not only explained against the back drop of sin as well as the divine remedy proffered in Christ. This one book sweeps right across the entire campus of Scripture demonstrating how humans fell in Adam and are reconciled to God with prospects of a delightful future (Romans 5:12ff). In the same breath, the book demonstrates the futility of the fallen heart, bound up in a sinful depraved nature (Pink 1998). Things can only get worse. Read against this back ground, the recent and continuing happenings in the world are hardly surprising where things that are clearly wrong in yester-years are suddenly applauded and encouraged. According to Paul, this is divine judgement underfoot (Romans 1:18-32). If one wishes to understand the gospel and its import, Romans, in addition to the Gospel of John, is a good place to start.

Purpose, Book Structure And Target Readership

Why was the epistle of Romans written and to whom? The answers to the raised questions are easily deciphered from the book itself as one reads. We here refer to internal evidence. For one thing, Paul wrote to explain the gospel as it is in Christ Jesus ahead of his scheduled visit because it was critical to give a clear statement about the Lord Jesus (Murrell n.d; Hunter 1954). Rome being the capital of the known world then, there was need to give a logical argument and expression of the gospel which would be understood by the complicated logical mind of the Hellenistically influenced people. That logical mind and expression came in Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Clearly, his recipients are the saints at Rome, who are said to have been called to be saints expressing itself in obedience (1:1,5-7). In order for us to easily grasp the contents of the book, we subdivide it into several thematic sections as given below¹:

1. Universality of sin leading to depravity: Paul commences his argument by stating that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because according to him, it is the world’s greatest need and only hope of transforming the world. In effect, he is stating that he has full confidence and is, in a sense, proud of the gospel. The reason is that it is divine in origin and has profound effect on the soul of a person upon whom it “*detonates*” completely and permanently transforming the soul’s landscape.

¹ Although we know many other worthy scholars structure the book differently, we take the thematic approach-on the doctrines taught in the book.

2. The Just shall live by faith: Paul states from the outset that salvation is by grace through faith. As such, those that would please God must live by faith. This realization transformed Martin Luther leading to the great Reformation (Jones 1985).
3. Both Jew and Gentile are both under sin: From Chapter 1:18 right across to the second, Paul makes landmark thesis statements. He asserts that all men, without exception, whether Jew or Gentile are in sin. To prove his case, the Apostle tabulates the common sins among the Gentile sinners which include idolatry, sexual perversion, hostility to God, applauding sinful acts among many (Romans 1:18-32). These, he claims, are certain evidences of their sinful condition and a sign or expression of God's wrath being progressively as well as final day judgement revealed (Verse 18a). His accurate sniper gun is primarily targeted at the Gentile in chapter one but in the second, the Apostle, as it were, refocuses his AK 47 assault Rifle towards the obstinate, overconfident religious Jew that boasted of being chosen of God thus having automatic entry into heaven by birth right (Romans 2: 17-23). Paul demolishes this assumption (including circumcision or any religious rites and privileges) proving that they too, need the gospel as much as the Gentiles do.
4. The remedy-Redemption: Having successfully demonstrated that both are sinners. The apostle declares that no one is righteous, not even one. To the contrary, all have gone astray and desperately need help from outside themselves. Paul shows in chapter three that no one loves or obeys the law to God's satisfaction (Romans 3:23). This is a hopeless and deadly case for humanity, deeply trapped in sin and destined to suffer God's eternal wrath, as the Lord unleashes His severe anger on all unrepentant flesh (Romans 6:23). Thankfully, the apostle offers a solution as found in Christ Jesus apart from the law (Romans 3:21). In unveiling this solution, Paul introduces critical words and expressions worth memorizing by every saint. He states that God has undertaken a rescue operation called "redemption" as it comes in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23-26). This redemption is apart from the law and comes by faith in Jesus Christ unlike by works as the Jew is wont to believe. By *redemption*, Paul means the divine rescue that God undertook in sending Jesus Christ to save lost humanity.
5. Justification by faith: Having shown the desperately weak state in which man finds himself and God's remedy in Christ, Justification by faith is introduced. By "*Justification*", Paul paints a court room scenario in which the guilty sinner stands condemned as far as the law is concerned but wonder of wonders, they are declared righteous as though they have never sinned! All this is premised on the atonement secured by Christ on the cross. Further, he shows that this justification is appropriated by faith in Jesus Christ not by works. Faith is both a gift and an instrument that the saint uses to appropriate the privileges couched in Justification. This word "justification" is a legal

forensic term which connotes a person's legal standing rather than that their holiness is changed. In Justification, a transaction occurs where the sinner and Christ switch places with Christ imputing his righteousness on the undeserving sinner. The apostle calls this "Grace" because no one deserves this grace. Thus from chapter three to the end of Chapter five, Paul is dealing with Justification, using case studies of Abraham and others in the Old Testament to prove that they too were justified by faith rather than works irrespective of the Testaments (Romans 4-5). One point often overlooked is the connection to and importance of Jesus' resurrection to Justification, the securing of Justification. Thus the resurrection is a critical doctrine to the gospel not a secondary one as some are wont to teach (Romans 4:25)². Granted, it does not save but is essential to assuring our pardon, no wonder Paul makes an issue of the resurrection of Christ in I Corinthians 15.

6. Sanctification: As though anticipating people to question his teaching or misunderstand it, Paul makes further statements that knocks down the antinomian arguments or propensity thereto. He states that the fact that grace has abounded to wicked sinners is by no means a licence to sin but rather an impetus to holiness. Thus from Chapter 6 and 7, Paul deals with sanctification, where the regenerate sinner now begins to wrestle with sin as they progressively are transformed into the image of Christ (Owen 2020; Owen 2018). With maturity comes mortification and wrestling with the world, the flesh and the Devil. The growing saint soon discover that they harbour within them, indwelling sin with which a wave an unrelenting bitter way to the very end, many times dying out in a frustrated tone, "*what a wretched man I am!*" (Romans 7:24; Owen 2020). This sanctification (though necessary) is not easy but with God's help, the saint goes along to conform to the image of Christ, with occasional frustrations and discouragements from the world, the flesh and the devil as earlier stated. These two chapters (6-7) prove that a saint cannot possibly continue to live in perpetual sin because they have been transformed. Sin no longer reigns in their mortal bodies but the mortification process is ongoing throughout life (Colossians 3:1-4).
7. Fruits of Justification: Throughout chapter eight, the apostle now highlights what has been called "the fruits of Justification" such as peace with God, forgiveness, sanctification and eventual glorification (Winslow 1991). Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, Paul initially introduces Predestination³ in this chapter while proving that those that are so predestined are eventually called, Justified and glorified (Romans 8:28-30). In between, the Spirit indwells the believer enabling them to live a sanctified life to the glory of God.

² Using the Theological Triage, some have relegated key doctrines like the Resurrection to the terraces. This, in my view is an error with respect to the Resurrection. Scan the gospels and Acts to see what I am arguing.

³ And Fore-knowledge.

8. Election: This (i.e. chapter 9) is admittedly one of the hardest chapters in the book. “Hard” not in terms of interpretation but implications. Paul categorically states that God has an elect people in the world and only they will eventually respond to the gospel call. Note that Paul is writing to a largely Gentile Church but using key examples in the Hebrew Bible to advance a principle. God’s sovereignty even in salvation is clearly brought to the fore. By implications, those not elected are reprobates, a form of double predestination.
9. The “All Israel” question: Paul shows his emotion and to some extent anxiety for the Jews, his native people. In as much as he would like them to be saved, Paul states that not all Israel is true Israel. None the less, he desires that they all get saved and thus stating that “All Israel” will be saved. As I read through this section, I find it a bit hard to determine what exactly the apostle intends to communicate or mean by the “*All Israel*”. Is it the natural and physical Israel or is it the Spiritual, let alone the elect “Israel” among the Jews? A further consideration would include whether the Israel here alluded to is the nation or the Church. That said, Chapter 10 and part of 11 deal with this question, summoning some Old Testament examples.
10. In Chapter 12 to about 15, the book now applies the truths stated in the earlier chapters although at the end of chapter 11 (verses 33 to 36), Paul appears overwhelmed with God’s plan of redemption and thus breaks into what is known as a “*doxology*”, praise and worship to God! In this section, the book also deals with practical and ethical issues such as Christian attitude to authority, self sanctity, foods and how Christians should relate to the law as well as to one another since they belong together. It is in this section also that Paul declares that the law is summarized and obeyed because of our faith and by virtue of being clothed with the righteousness of Christ.
11. Finally, in Chapter 16, the writer offers personal salutations, greetings and exhortations. His greetings are strikingly personal, rich and proffer some unexpected level of detail which make the Bible critics question whether in fact chapter sixteen was indeed part of the original, let alone authored by Paul. This glorious book draws to a close with several hall mark statements such as Christ crushing the serpent’s head soon, in apparent reference to Genesis 3:15ff. Reformed Theologians call this the ‘*proto evangelium*,’⁴ the promise of a Messiah, early in the Biblical narrative.

If one would like a deep appreciation and understand the book of Romans, I would strongly recommend that they carefully read the epistle itself before reverting to (listening or reading sermons) works and commentaries from sound authorities including: Murrell’s exposition, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ & Joe

⁴ In Greek for “first good-news or gospel”

Simfukwe's⁵ Spirit blessed Romans (and Ephesians) expository series among many other rich treatments of the epistle.

In summing up this book, we offer some thoughts arising from reading Murrell's treatment:

1. Murrell's use of the Greek language to explain some terms is most helpful to a proper objective and accurate exposition of the book. For instance, he uses the two Greek words that relate to God's wrath—"Thumos" and "Orge".
2. The writer demonstrates that God's wrath is real despite the opposition that it receives from many scholars today. "Wrath" can be expressed and understood in at least two senses, hence the use of two Greek words earlier alluded to. The one is a sudden radical act of punishment and anger while the other is slow, progressive but certain.
3. Murrell gives a good back ground of Saul who turned to Paul after his conversion.
4. FF Bruce, Murrell and Hunter explain what Romans is about-The gospel.
5. As earlier stated, Paul shows that God's wrath is Being revealed and the wicked acts of men show that His patience lingers on but a time comes when He gives them over to a depraved mind to do things they ought not to do.
6. Paul also shows that even the Jews are equally sinners destined to face the wrath of God. This seals the doom of all men showing that they all stand in need of salvation by grace alone. In themselves, they are but slaves to sin.

One does themselves great service if they master the epistle. Every other doctrine then makes sense. Galatians also makes better sense then. Oh that men would read and treasure this book once again!

Perceived Problems with the book

The book is clearly attributed to the Apostle Paul because the Salutation states so (1:1). It is believed to have written to a Church he had never visited but sends it forth as an emissary ahead of his planned visit. There are however voices today claiming that the book was indeed written by Paul but only partly. The language is fairly consistent but chapter 16 is thought not to have originally been part of the Epistle, so these liberal theologians suggest. They pick issue with the

⁵ Joe Simfukwe was a very pivotal speaker God used in Zambia to expound the deep truths of the faith between 1979-1989 when he left Lusaka Baptist Church. See Appendix I for a snap shot of this phenomenal man. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones scarcely needs any introduction but arguably one of the foremost Bible expositors of the 20th century, if not of all time, since the Apostle Paul!

many people he mentions by name and yet had never met some of them. This is however a weak argument because Paul was an Apostle and could have easily accessed information from the brethren at Rome or even from people like Priscilla and Aquilla, his once business associates (Acts 18:1-3). The other perceived apparent problem are the doctrines advanced in this book chief of them being Predestination, Election, the state of Israel at the end times among others. That said, the book is pretty straight forward.

Key Take Away Lessons Gleaned from Romans

1. Romans is a pivotal book explaining the gospel.
2. Every Christian ought to know this important book and it's content.
3. Salvation is explained in the book; Why, How and to what end.
4. The concept of Justification being a "court room scenario" has been challenged in recent days by revisionist like NT Wright (*What Paul really said...*). However, their arguments cannot overthrow the solid historic position.
5. Martin Luther considered this doctrine (Justification) the grand pivotal doctrine upon which everything hung, as did J.I Packer in his prime.
6. The Reformation was triggered by a reading of this book.
7. The Five Solas find a safe place and haven in this book.
8. The gospel, according to Paul, is the ultimate solution for humanity and his problem of sin or its offshoots.
9. In Romans 5:12ff, Paul declares that all human beings became sinners in the first Adam but redeemed in the last Adam, Jesus Christ, if they believe in him.
10. This treatise is one of the most logical and comprehensive arguments written by the Apostle Paul. It is written to explain the gospel to the Romans before he visited there.
11. Romans 1-3 declares that all humans are sinners irrespective of their pedigree, status or background. Mid-section of chapter 3-5, Justification by Faith is revealed in clear terms; Chapters 6-7, Sanctification is dealt with while in 8 the fruit of Justification is *elaborated*. *Chapters 9-11 are somewhat difficult to explain or understand (often resting on one's hermeneutic)* but through some light on the state, end and plight of the Nation of Israel. The chapters 12-16 are applicatory in nature.

12. Generally, scholars agree that Paul authored this epistle although some sections of it are in question by some, especially Chapter 16. They question how the Apostle knew a large number of people by name in that Church, many of whom he had never met?
13. The book teaches us, among other things, the primacy of the gospel in redemption. Creation, Fall and Redemption comes out clearly in this monumental work.
14. Christians should prize this book more than they do in these degenerate days. It speaks freedom for the Christian. By the same token, enemies of Justification, or indeed the Christian faith, hate this book with a passion.
15. Although Martin Luther felt the Epistle of James contradicted this herculean book, this is not so. Each writer explains a view from a different angle but actually speaking the same language: Justification is by faith alone but it never is alone as some have rightly said!

Conclusion

This book is crucially essential to the Christian faith but sadly neglected in these degenerate days. We need an awakening akin to the Spirit induced and sustained Lloyd-Jones and Simfukwe days. It can happen again, if we only plead before the throne above. May this day arrive soon, Amen!

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Appendix I

The Lusaka Baptist Church Scenario 1979-1989

From about 1979 a mini religious awakening swept across Zambia (circa 1975 to approximately 1990). The said revival, among many things, occasioned the radical conversion of thousands to Christ, people suddenly had a lively desire to know Christ and to do His work. Everywhere people were conscious of the presence of God and attended every prayer meeting as well as evangelized when opportunity availed itself. Among the key revivalists at the time was a man called Joe Simfukwe, who was a fervent and fine expositor of the word. He adopted a systematic approach to expounding the Holy Scriptures to the end that many people might be built up as leaders. Every Sunday, he exercised a powerful and affecting ministry. He guarded his pulpit jealously and scarcely moved out or roved around the world, given his international reputation. This was rare discipline and dedication to the local assembly. For years, God blessed the

work abundantly to the extent that LBC became a powerful magnet around Lusaka. It was primarily known for the gospel, the pure unadulterated and uncompromised gospel. This activity went on for nearly ten years when Simfukwe suddenly announced his resignation and eventually smoothly transitioned from the Lusaka Baptist Church to pursue further studies abroad. An interesting phenomenon occurred because there was a latent leadership crisis that surfaced. Having been such a fine sound leader, people assumed Pastor Simfukwe would be there always and thus never made plans to prepare to take over his (oversized?) shoes following his departure.

As a result, no one was found equal to the task for over 3 years, yet his powerful influence still lingered on many years afterwards.

In the fourth year, the Church felt they needed another Pastor and thus called another to take over but the new person⁶ lasted only a few years. Reasons vary but one subjective suspicion was probably JM's 'Ghost' still lingered powerfully in people's minds. A piece of his mettle lived in a critical mass of them. The question that still begs answering in peoples' minds today is why a vacuum was created and how that crisis could have been really avoided. Could that problem have been avoided?

Observations and thoughts

After much careful thought and research we observe that though Pastor Simfukwe (JM) was a great leader, he probably did not successfully pass on the "Body of Divinity" to a wider body⁷ of faithful men. He seems to have been a great crowd puller. He probably did not focus much on one to one mentorship, though heart-warming testimonies to the contra effect exist⁸. Being Charismatic and magnetic, he dealt with crowds rather than individuals and as such did not pick many understudies except those who had a high IQ and could follow him through⁹. The following were my findings:

1. The Church had grown in knowledge but people were not given opportunity to exercise their leadership qualities. They were mesmerized and spell bound by the powerful preaching and never got to 'get the ropes' to strengthen their gifts. Dependence often spoils many of us.

⁶ i.e. Gevara Nyirenda. Nyirenda's style was different from JM but equally effective. I still enjoy his sermons on tape to this day!

⁷ Or critical mass; another reason could be he was extraordinarily gifted which the rest did not realise until after his departure.

⁸ He is said to have invested in preaching classes from which some of today's towering preachers arose.

⁹ Surprisingly, JM comes across as an introvert of sorts though exceptionally warm, never referring to self. Amazing humility.

2. It appears the preacher appealed more to the intellect rather than causing people to apply those truths in real life. Although the pastor tried to address that much too late. Given that the majority were students, it is only logical that he took the approach that he did, very appropriate for the times.

3. The said clergy, although a leader, was one of a kind genius who had all the attributes in built. Others could not imitate or replicate. Sacred anointing that Tony Sargent says of DM Lloyd-Jones could have been his portion.

4. The Church members were so influenced (positively of course) that they forgot that they needed to stand on their own feet!

5. The intellectuals in the Church caught up with his teaching and begun to question him on many things.

6. The said Pastor could have invested more in upcoming leaders (though some argue that he held preaching classes to whoever was interested) in the church and as such, not an adequate or strong claim/argument.

We must however hasten to say that he produced one world class preacher in the person of Conrad Mbewe¹⁰ who has ascended to higher orbs of leadership and pulpit powers. Conrad is an international roving preacher, quoted often everywhere he goes. Many do not know that the venerable J M Simfukwe nurtured this man. In my view, the world needs to honour 'JM' far much more than hitherto has been the case. His pulpit powers are clearly unequalled among Zambian preachers to this day. Oh for more of such humble, godly, Spirit filled effective preachers! Well, the six reasons advanced above are not exhaustive but they shed some light on what happened leading to the leadership vacuum for Churches now and into the future.

Lessons Gleaned from the LBC Scenario

We learn the following:

(1) Never let anyone be a “boss,” solo super star operator no matter how gifted – team work is critical as no one person can succeed to do an activity, institutions must function as an organism, with all players functioning and over lapping freely. We call that team work. Parity should be jealously guarded.

(2) Always build capacity in people by challenging them to take up roles once in a while. This avoids a situation where people content themselves in merely sitting rather than exercising their gifts.

¹⁰ A New Calvinist

(3) leaders must be servants and always learning, team players and willing to hear or respond to what is happening on the ground (i.e. in the Church).

(4) Leaders must aim to stimulate, not only the emotions but the mind as well towards action.

My recommendations emanate from the afore mentioned lessons:

(1) Future leaders in all churches must be visionary, good team players and easily approachable. Simfukwe was exceptionally approachable but, in my view, way above people in his intellect. He had a remarkable memory. I remember only once telling him my name (as a teenager just coming out of the woodwork of sin) and he never forgot it! You can imagine the incredible effect it had on me and others! He was most sincere and personable, no airs of self-importance. Humility was his necklace.

(2) Future pastors must be ones that are flexible, listening and able to look at problems as opportunities.

(3) Pastors must be well taken care of while other Church officers must equally be active to ensure they “learn the ropes”. Eldership parity & plurality (where possible) is a must for genuine Baptists.

(4) Where possible, the Church must have more than one full time Pastor¹¹ though both must be equally good team players.

(5) Though the Church must not be directly involved in social issues/projects it ought to facilitate avenues so that the members can have a way to express themselves.

(6) Preaching, although central in a Church, is not the only avenue leaders can be identified. Leadership is influence not a formal position as many wrongly suppose.

End.

Note that I wrote this as part of my MBA school work on Leadership in 2000. With a few minor changes, the substance remains essentially the same.

¹¹ Assuming parity of elders exists. Actually, all Elders are Pastors and vice versa.

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