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JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of

# Romans

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of Romans

# God's good news for the world

John Stott

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## General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER  
JOHN STOTT  
DEREK TIDBALL  
*Series editors*

## Author's preface

'Not another commentary on Romans?' My friend groaned audibly. There was pain in his voice and in his eyes. And I sympathized with him. For the literature surrounding Romans is so massive as to be unmanageable. I have myself read about thirty commentaries, not to mention numerous other works which relate to Paul and Romans, and still there are many more which I have not had time to study. Is it not a folly then, even an impertinence, to add yet another book to this huge library? Yes, it would be, were it not for the three distinctives of *The Bible Speaks Today (BST)* series which perhaps, if taken together, may justify it.

First, *BST* authors (like all other commentators) are committed to a serious study of the text in its own integrity. Although a pre-suppositionless approach is impossible (and all the commentators tend to be recognizably Lutheran or Reformed, Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative), yet I have known that my first responsibility has been to seek a fresh encounter with the authentic Paul. Karl Barth, in his preface to the first edition of his famous *Römerbrief* (1918), called this an 'utter loyalty' to Paul, which would allow the apostle to say what he does say and would not force him to say what we might want him to say.

This principle has made it necessary for me to listen respectfully to those scholars who are offering us a 'new perspective on Paul', especially Professors Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders and J. D. G. Dunn. Their claims that both Paul and Palestinian Judaism have been gravely misunderstood have to be taken seriously, although I note that the most recent commentator, the American Jesuit scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, whose work appeared in 1993 and was hailed by the reviewers as 'monumental' and 'magisterial', almost entirely ignores this debate. All I have felt able to do is to sketch a brief explanation and evaluation of it in my Preliminary Essay.

But expositors should not be antiquarians, living only in the remote past. Reverting to Barth, it was his conviction that Paul, although 'a child of his age', who addressed his contemporaries, also 'speaks to all men of every age'. So he celebrated the 'creative energy' with which Luther and Calvin had wrestled with Paul's message 'till the walls which separated the sixteenth century from the first became transparent'. And the same dialectical process between ancient text and modern context must continue today, even though many commentators confine themselves to exegesis without application.

I confess that, ever since I became a Christian fifty-six years ago, I have enjoyed what could be termed a 'love-hate' relationship with Romans, because of its joyful-painful personal challenges. It began soon after my conversion, with chapter 6 and my longing to experience that 'death to sin' which it seemed to promise. I toyed for many years with the fantasy that Christians are supposed to be as insensitive to sin as a corpse is to external stimuli. My final deliverance from this chimera was sealed when I was invited to give the Keswick Convention 'Bible Readings' on Romans 5–8 in 1965, which were subsequently published under the title *Men Made New*.

Next, it was Paul's devastating exposure of universal human sin and guilt in Romans 1:18–3:20 which rescued me from that kind of superficial evangelism which is preoccupied only with people's 'felt needs'. The very first sermon I preached after my ordination in 1945, in St Peter's Church, Vere Street, was based on the repeated Romans statement that 'there is no distinction' between us (3:22 and 10:12), either in our sin or in Christ's salvation. Then there was Romans 12 and its demand for our whole-hearted commitment in response to God's mercies, and Romans 13, whose teaching about the use of force in the administration of justice made it impossible for me to remain a total pacifist in the Tolstoy-Gandhi tradition. As for Romans 8, although I have declaimed its final triumphant verses at innumerable funerals, I have never lost the thrill of them.

I have not been altogether surprised, therefore, in the course of writing this exposition, to observe how many contemporary issues are touched on by Paul in Romans: enthusiasm for evangelism in general and the propriety of Jewish evangelism in particular; whether homosexual relationships are 'natural' or 'unnatural'; whether we can still believe in such unfashionable concepts as God's 'wrath' and 'propitiation'; the historicity of Adam's fall and the origin of human death; what are the fundamental means to living a holy life; the place of law and of the Spirit in Christian discipleship; the distinction between assurance and presumption; the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation; the tension between ethnic identity and the solidarity of the body of Christ; relations between church and state; the respective duties of the individual citizen and the body politic; and how to handle differences of opinion within the Christian community. And this list is only a sample of the modern questions which, directly or indirectly, Romans raises and addresses.

The third characteristic of the *BST* series is that each book is intended to be both readable in style and manageable in size. A commentary, in distinction to an exposition, is a reference work and to that extent unreadable. Moreover, many of the most influential commentaries on Romans have been published in two volumes, such as those by C. H. Hodge, Robert Haldane and John Murray, and those in our own day by Professors Cranfield and Dunn. As for the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, his penetrating exposition of Romans 1–9 runs to nine volumes, comprising more than 3,000 pages. By contrast with these multi-volume works, which I fear many busy Christian leaders do not have time to read, I have been determined from the beginning to limit this exposition to one volume (even though a bulky one!), while at the same time making available to readers some of the fruits of my study of the larger works.

I am grateful to Brian Rosner and David Coffey for reading the manuscript and making suggestions, a number of which I have adopted; to Colin Duzier and Jo Bramwell of IVP for their patient editorial skills; to David Stone for compiling the study guide; to Nelson González, my current study assistant, for giving himself the punishing task of reading the manuscript four times, and for deftly putting his finger on weak places where clarification or elaboration was needed; and, last but not least, to Frances Whitehead, whose undiminished enthusiasm, energy and efficiency have combined to produce yet another impeccable script.

At the beginning of his fourth-century exposition of Romans, Chrysostom spoke of how much he enjoyed hearing Paul's 'spiritual trumpet'.<sup>1</sup> My prayer is that we may hear it again in our day and may readily respond to its summons.

JOHN STOTT

*Easter 1994*

## Chief abbreviations

- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
- BAGD Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer's fifth edition, 1958 (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- ET English translation.
- GNB The Good News Bible (NT, 1966, fourth edition 1976; OT, 1976).
- GT *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by C. L. W. Grimm and J. H. Thayer (T. and T. Clark, 1901).
- JB The Jerusalem Bible (1966).
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
- LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, third century BC.  
mg. Margin.
- Moffatt James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1926, Old and New Testaments in one volume; revised 1935).
- NEB The New English Bible (NT, 1961, second edition 1970; OT, 1970).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
- REB The Revised English Bible (1989).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).
- RV The Revised Version of the Bible (1881–5); Apocrypha, 1895.
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, translated by G. W. Bromiley, 10 volumes (Eerdmans, 1964–76).

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## Preliminary essay

Paul's letter to the Romans is a kind of Christian manifesto. To be sure, it is also a letter, whose contents were determined by the particular situations in which the apostle and the Romans found themselves at that time. Nevertheless, it remains a timeless manifesto, a manifesto of freedom through Jesus Christ. It is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament. Its message is not that 'man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains', as Rousseau put it at the beginning of *The Social Contract* (1762); it is rather that human beings are born in sin and slavery, but that Jesus Christ came to set us free. For here is unfolded the good news of freedom, freedom from the holy wrath of God upon all ungodliness, freedom from alienation into reconciliation, freedom from the condemnation of God's law, freedom from what Malcolm Muggeridge used to call 'the dark little dungeon of our own ego', freedom from the fear of death, freedom one day from the decay of the groaning creation into the glorious liberty of God's children, and meanwhile freedom from ethnic conflict in the family of God, and freedom to give ourselves to the loving service of God and others.

It is not surprising that the church in every generation has acknowledged the importance of Romans, not least at the time of the Reformation. Luther called it 'really the chief part of the New Testament, and ... truly the purest gospel'. He continued: 'It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.'<sup>1</sup> Calvin wrote similarly, declaring that 'if we have

gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture'<sup>2</sup>

The same appreciation of Romans was expressed by British Reformers. William Tyndale, for example, the father of English Bible translators, in his prologue to Romans, described it as 'the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament, and most pure Euangelion, that is to say, glad tidings ... and also a light and a way in unto the whole Scripture'. He went on to urge his readers to learn it by heart. For, he assured them, 'the more it is studied, the easier it is; the more it is chewed, the pleasanter it is'<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The influence of the letter

Several notable church leaders have testified, in different centuries, to the impact which Romans has made on their lives, in some cases being the means of their conversion. I mention five of them, in order to encourage us to take our study seriously.

Aurelius Augustinus, known to the world as Augustine of Hippo, destined to become the greatest Latin Father of the early church, was born on a small farm in what is now Algeria. During his turbulent youth he was both the slave of his sexual passions and the object of his mother Monica's prayers. As a teacher of literature and rhetoric he moved successively to Carthage, Rome, and then Milan, where he came under the spell of Bishop Ambrose's preaching. It was there during the summer of the year 386, when he was thirty-two years old, that he went out into the garden of his lodging, seeking solitude. 'The tumult of my heart took me out into the garden', he wrote later in his *Confessions*, 'where no-one could interfere with the burning struggle with myself in which I was engaged ... I was twisting and turning in my chains ... I threw myself down somehow under a certain fig tree, and let my tears flow freely.'

Suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl ... saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' ... I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find ... So I hurried back to the place where ... I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eye lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Rom. 13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.<sup>4</sup>

In 1515 another professor was overtaken by a similar spiritual crisis. Like everybody else in medieval Christendom, Martin Luther had been brought up in the fear of God, death, judgment and hell. Because the surest way to gain heaven (it was thought) was to become a monk, in 1505 at the age of twenty-one he entered the Augustinian cloister at Erfuhrt, where he prayed and fasted, sometimes for days on end, and adopted other extreme austerities. 'I was a good monk,' he wrote later. 'If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.'<sup>5</sup> 'Luther probed every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God.'<sup>6</sup> But nothing pacified his tormented conscience until, having been appointed Professor of Bible at Wittenberg University, he studied and expounded first the Psalms (1513-15) and then Romans (1515-16). At first he was angry with God, he later confessed, because he seemed to him more a terrifying judge than a merciful saviour. Where might he find a gracious God? What could Paul mean in Romans 1:17 when he stated that 'the righteousness of God was revealed in the gospel'? Luther tells us how his dilemma was resolved:

I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood to the way but that one expression 'the righteousness of God', because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous ... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith.

Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me

inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Some 200 years later, it was Luther's own God-given insight into the truth of justification by grace through faith which led to the similar illumination of John Wesley. His younger brother Charles had with some Oxford friends founded what came to be nicknamed 'the Holy Club', and in November 1729 John joined it and became its acknowledged leader. Its members engaged in sacred studies, self-examination, public and private religious exercises, and philanthropic activities, apparently hoping to win salvation by such good works. Then in 1735 the brothers Wesley sailed for Georgia as chaplains to the settlers and missionaries to the Indians. Two years later they returned in a profound disillusionment, which was mitigated only by their admiration for the piety and faith of some Moravians. Then on 24 May 1738, during a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, to which John Wesley had gone 'very unwillingly', he turned from self-confidence to faith in Christ. Somebody was reading Luther's *Preface to ... Romans*. Wesley wrote in his journal:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.<sup>8</sup>

Coming now into our own era, two other Christian leaders may be mentioned. Both were Europeans, one Romanian, the other Swiss. Both were clergy, one Orthodox, the other Protestant. Both were born in the 1880s, although they never met and may never even have heard of each other. Yet, despite their different countries, cultures and churches, both were transformed by their study of Romans. I am referring to Dumitru Cornilescu and Karl Barth.

While studying at the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Bucharest, Dumitru Cornilescu<sup>9</sup> longed to experience a greater spiritual reality and depth. During his search he was introduced to some books by evangelical authors, who themselves directed him to the Bible. So he determined to translate the Bible into modern Romanian, began the work in 1916 and almost six years later completed it. Through his study of Romans he came to believe truths which previously had been unfamiliar and even unacceptable to him: that 'there is no-one righteous, not even one' (3:10), that 'all have sinned' (3:23), that 'the wages of sin is death' (6:23), and that sinners may be 'justified freely' through Christ (3:24), because 'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood' (3:25). Through these and other texts of Romans he came to see that God through Christ had done everything necessary for our salvation. 'I took this forgiveness for myself,' he said; 'I accepted Christ as my living Saviour.' 'From that point on,' writes Paul Negrut, 'Cornilescu was assured that he belonged to God, and that he was a new person.' His translation, published in 1921, became the standard Bible Society text. But he himself was exiled by the Orthodox Patriarch in 1923, and died some years later in Switzerland.

Switzerland was also the home of Karl Barth. During his pre-war theological studies he came under the influence of some of the leading liberal scholars of the day and shared their utopic dream of human progress and social change. But the horrific carnage and bestiality of the First World War, and his reflection on the message of Romans, were enough in combination to shatter the illusions of liberal optimism. Even while writing his exposition, he said that 'it required only a little imagination ... to hear the sound of the guns booming away in the north.'<sup>10</sup> The publication of the first edition of his commentary in 1918 marked his decisive break with theological liberalism. He had come to see that the kingdom of God was not a religious brand of socialism, achieved by human prowess, but a radically new beginning initiated by God.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the bedrock he had come up against was 'the Godness of God', that is, 'God's absolutely unique existence, power and initiation'.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously he came to perceive the depths of human sin and guilt. He entitled his exposition of Romans 1:18f. (Paul's exposé of Gentile depravity) 'The Night', and wrote about verse 18: 'Our relation to God is *ungodly* ... We assume that ... we are able to arrange our relation to him as we arrange our other relationships ... We dare to deck ourselves out as his companions, patrons, advisers and commissioners ... This is the *ungodliness* of our relation to God.'<sup>13</sup>

Barth confessed that he wrote 'with a joyful sense of discovery'. For, he added, 'the mighty voice of Paul was new to me: and if to me, no doubt to many others also'.<sup>14</sup> But his uncompromising emphasis on the sinner's absolute dependence on the sovereign, saving grace of God in Jesus Christ created what Sir Edwyn Hoskins (his English translator) described as a 'hubbub and commotion'.<sup>15</sup> Or, as the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Adam put it, using appropriate wartime imagery, Barth's commentary dropped 'like a bombshell on the theologians' playground'.<sup>16</sup>

F. F. Bruce, who drew attention—rather more briefly than I have done—to the influence of Romans on four of these five men, wisely added that its impact has not been confined to such giants, since 'very ordinary men and women' have been affected by it too. Indeed, 'there is no saying what may happen when people begin to study the letter to the Romans.

So, let those who have read thus far be prepared for the consequences of reading farther: you have been warned!'<sup>17</sup>

## 2. New challenges to old traditions

It has long been taken for granted, at least since the Reformation, that the apostle's chief emphasis in Romans is on God's justification of sinners by grace, in Christ, through faith. For example, Calvin wrote in his introductory essay on 'The Theme of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans' that 'the main subject of the whole Epistle ... is that we are justified by faith'.<sup>18</sup> This is not to deny that Paul goes on to handle the further themes of assurance (chapter 5), sanctification (chapter 6), the place of the law (chapter 7), the ministry of the Spirit (chapter 8), God's plan for both Jews and Gentiles (chapters 9–11) and the varied responsibilities of the Christian life (chapters 12–15). Nevertheless, the assumption has

been that Paul's main preoccupation was with justification, and that he developed those other topics only in relation to justification.

During this century, however, and in particular during the last thirty years, this thesis has been challenged. In 1963 an article by Professor Krister Stendahl, who later served as Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review*, entitled 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', which was subsequently incorporated in his book *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*.<sup>[19]</sup> He maintained that the traditional understanding of Paul in general and of Romans in particular, namely that their focus is on justification by faith, is wrong. This mistake, he continued, is due to the western church's morbid conscience,<sup>[20]</sup> and specially to the moral struggles of Augustine and Luther, which the church has tended to read back into Paul. Justification, according to Bishop Stendahl, is not 'the pervasive, organizing doctrinal principle or insight of Paul',<sup>[21]</sup> but 'was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promises of God to Israel'.<sup>[22]</sup> Paul's concern was not his own salvation, for he himself had a 'robust conscience',<sup>[23]</sup> claimed to be 'blameless',<sup>[24]</sup> and experienced 'no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience, no feelings of shortcomings',<sup>[25]</sup> but rather the salvation of the Gentiles, that they could come to Christ directly and not through the law. Consequently, 'the climax of Romans is actually chapters 9-11, i.e. his reflections on the relation between church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish people',<sup>[26]</sup> and chapters 1-8 are 'a preface',<sup>[27]</sup> Romans is 'about God's plan for the world and about how Paul's mission to the Gentiles fits into that plan',<sup>[28]</sup>

To some degree this is a necessary corrective. For justification is certainly not Paul's exclusive preoccupation, as we have seen. Nevertheless, Romans 1-8 cannot be downgraded to the status of a mere 'preface'. Bishop Stendahl seems to have set up an unnecessarily sharp antithesis. Paul was indeed deeply exercised, as the apostle to the Gentiles, about the place of the law in salvation and about the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ. But he was also evidently concerned to expound and defend the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. In fact, the two concerns, far from being incompatible, are inextricably interwoven. Only loyalty to the gospel can secure unity in the church.

Whether Paul's pre-conversion conscience was as cloudless as Dr Stendahl makes out, and whether we in the West have unduly introspective consciences which we have projected on to Paul, only careful exegesis of the crucial texts can settle. But in 1:18-3:20 it is Paul (not Augustine or Luther) who establishes universal and inexcusable human guilt. And Paul's own claim to have been 'blameless' in law-righteousness<sup>[29]</sup> must have referred to an *external* conformity to the law's demands. For in those revealing autobiographical verses in the middle of Romans 7 (if that is what they are) he tells how it was the commandment against covetousness, being an *internal* sin of heart, not action, which provoked in him 'every kind of evil desire' and so brought him to spiritual death. Professor Stendahl does not refer to this passage. Besides, it is not necessary to polarize between a 'morbid' and a 'robust' conscience. A truly healthy conscience disturbs our security and shames our pride, especially when the Holy Spirit comes to 'convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment'<sup>[30]</sup> We should not therefore expect any unregenerate person to have a completely clear conscience.

In 1977 the major work of the American scholar Professor E. P. Sanders was published, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Describing the prevailing picture of Palestinian Judaism as 'a religion of legalistic works-righteousness',<sup>[31]</sup> and of Paul's gospel as self-consciously antithetical to Judaism, he declared that his purpose was to 'destroy that view' as being 'completely wrong' and to show that it 'is based on a massive perversion and misunderstanding of the material'.<sup>[32]</sup> He conceded that his thesis was not altogether new, since, as Dr N. T. Wright has written, G. F. Moore 'set out substantially the same position' in the three volumes of his *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (1927-30).<sup>[33]</sup> Nevertheless, Professor Sanders went further. He surveyed with immense erudition the rabbinic, Qumranic and apocryphal literature of Judaism from 200 BC to AD 200. And the religion which emerged from this study he characterized as 'covenantal nomism'. That is, God had brought Israel into a covenant relationship with himself by his grace, and had then asked for obedience to his law (nomism) as their response. This led Professor Sanders to portray Judaism's 'pattern of religion' in terms of 'getting in' (by God's gracious election) and 'staying in' (by obedience). 'Obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it does not earn God's grace as such'.<sup>[34]</sup> Disobedience was atoned for by repentance.

Part II of Professor Sanders' book is simply headed 'Paul'. Even though it is only about a quarter the length of Part I, it is of course impossible to do it justice in a single paragraph. Highlights of Professor Sanders' thesis are as follows: (1) that Paul's starting-point was not the belief that all human beings are guilty sinners before God, but rather that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles, so that 'for Paul the conviction of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight';<sup>[35]</sup> (2) that salvation is essentially a 'transfer' from the bondage of sin to the lordship of Christ; (3) that the means of transfer is 'participation' with Christ in his death and resurrection;<sup>[36]</sup> (4) that the reason salvation must be 'by faith' is not to obviate human pride, but that if it were 'by law' the Gentiles would be excluded and Christ's death would have been unnecessary ('the argument for faith is really an argument against the law');<sup>[37]</sup> and (5) that the resulting saved community is 'one person in Christ'.<sup>[38]</sup> Professor Sanders calls this way of thinking 'participationist eschatology'.<sup>[39]</sup> It will readily be seen, however, that in this attempted reconstruction of Paul's gospel the familiar categories of human sin and guilt, the wrath of God, justification by grace without works, and peace with God

in consequence, are conspicuous by their absence.

In his second book, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*,<sup>[40]</sup> Professor Sanders replies to some of his critics and seeks to clarify and develop his thesis. He is surely right, in general, that Paul's 'argument concerns the equal standing of Jews and Gentiles—both are under the power of sin—and the identical ground on which they change that status—faith in Jesus Christ.'<sup>[41]</sup> But he then insists that 'the supposed objection to Jewish self-righteousness is absent from Paul's letters as self-righteousness itself is from Jewish literature.'<sup>[42]</sup> That is a much more questionable statement. At least five issues need to be raised.

First, the evidence is plain that the language of 'weighing', that is, of 'balancing merits against demerits',<sup>[43]</sup> does not occur in the literature of Palestinian Judaism. But does the absence of this imagery of the scales prove the absence of the concept of merit? Cannot works-righteousness exist even when it is not 'weighed'? Paul was not mistaken to describe some Jews as 'pursuing' righteousness and not attaining it (9:30f.), and others as 'trying to be justified by law'.<sup>[44]</sup>

Secondly, in Judaism entry into the covenant was understood as depending on God's grace. This is hardly surprising, since in the Old Testament itself God is seen to take the initiative in his grace to establish his covenant with Israel. There could be no question of 'deserving' or 'earning' one's membership. Yet Professor Sanders goes on to show that 'the theme of reward and punishment is ubiquitous in the Tannaitic literature',<sup>[45]</sup> specially with regard to gaining life in the world to come. Does this not mean that human merit, while not the basis (in Judaism) of entering the covenant, was yet the basis of remaining in it? But Paul would have been vehement in his rejection of this. To him 'getting in' and 'staying in' are both by grace alone. Not only have we been justified by grace through faith (5:1), but we continue to stand in this grace into which we have been granted access by faith (5:2).

Thirdly, Professor Sanders concedes that 4 Ezra was the one exception to his thesis. For in this apocryphal book, he writes, 'one sees how Judaism works when it actually does become a religion of individual self-righteousness'. Here 'covenantal nomism has collapsed. All that is left is legalistic perfectionism.'<sup>[46]</sup> If one literary example has survived, may there not have been others which did not survive? May not the lapse into legalism have been more widespread than Professor Sanders admits? Besides, he has been criticized for reducing the complexity of first-century Judaism into 'a single, unitary, harmonious, and linear development'.<sup>[47]</sup> Professor Martin Hengel makes the same point. He writes that 'in contrast to the progressive "unification" of Palestinian Judaism under the leadership of the rabbinic scribes after AD 70, the spiritual face of Jerusalem before its destruction was a markedly "pluralistic" one'. After listing nine different groups he concludes: 'Jerusalem and its environs must have presented the contemporary visitor with a confusingly varied picture'.<sup>[48]</sup> Again, 'perhaps there was no such thing as this *one* Palestinian Judaism with the *one* binding view of the law'.<sup>[49]</sup>

Fourthly, the case developed by E. P. Sanders and others rests on the meticulous examination of the relevant literature. But is it not well known that popular religion may diverge widely from the official literature of its leaders? It is this very distinction which leads Professor Sanders to write: 'The possibility cannot be completely excluded that there were Jews accurately hit by the polemic of Matthew 23 ... Human nature being what it is, one supposes that there were some such. One must say, however, that the surviving Jewish literature does not reveal them.'<sup>[50]</sup> A parallel could be drawn with Anglicanism. The *Book of Common Prayer* and the Thirty-nine Articles, that is, the official literature of the church, insist that 'we are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings',<sup>[51]</sup> and that we may not 'presume' to approach God 'trusting in our own righteousness'.<sup>[52]</sup> Nothing could be clearer in the literature. Yet is it unfair to conjecture that the actual faith of many Anglicans remains one of works-righteousness?

Fifthly, it is clear that Paul had a horror of boasting. This has traditionally been taken as a rejection of self-righteousness. We are to boast in Christ and his cross,<sup>[53]</sup> not in ourselves or each other.<sup>[54]</sup> Professor Sanders, however, interprets Paul's antipathy to Jewish boasting (e.g. 3:27f.; 4:1f.) as being directed against pride in their favoured status (2:17, 23), which would be incompatible with the equal standing of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, not against pride in their merit,<sup>[55]</sup> which would be incompatible with a due humility before God. But one wonders if this distinction can be maintained as neatly as Professor Sanders does. Paul seems to bracket them in Philippians 3:3–9, where he contrasts 'glorying in Christ Jesus' with 'putting confidence in the flesh'. And the context shows that in 'the flesh' (what we are in our unredeemed self-centredness) Paul included both his status as 'a Hebrew of Hebrews' and his obedience to the law: 'in regard to the law a Pharisee ... as for legalistic righteousness [that is, external conformity to the requirements of the law] faultless'. In other words, the boasting which Paul had himself renounced, and now condemned, was a self-righteousness compounded of both status-righteousness and works-righteousness. In addition, the apostle twice writes of a righteousness which can be described as our 'own' either because we think we 'have' it or because we are seeking to 'establish' it.<sup>[56]</sup> Both passages indicate that this righteousness of our own (*i.e.* self-righteousness) is based on law-obedience, and that those who 'pursue' it thereby indicate that they are unwilling to 'submit' to God's righteousness. In Romans 4:4–5 Paul also makes a sharp contrast between 'working' and 'trusting', and so between a 'wage' and a 'gift'.

Finally, I am grateful for Professor Sanders' reference, quoted in paragraph 4 above, to 'human nature being what it is'. For our fallen human nature is incurably self-centred, and pride is the elemental human sin, whether the form it takes is self-importance, self-confidence, self-assertion or self-righteousness. If we human beings were left to our own self-absorption, even our religion would be pressed into the service of ourselves. Instead of being the vehicle for the selfless

adoration of God, our piety would become the base on which we would presume to approach God and to attempt to establish a claim on him. The ethnic religions all seem to degenerate thus, *and so does Christianity*. In spite of the learned literary researches of E. P. Sanders, therefore, I cannot myself believe that Judaism is the one exception to this degenerative principle, being free from all taint of self-righteousness. As I have read and pondered his books, I have kept asking myself whether perhaps he knows more about Palestinian Judaism than he does about the human heart.

Certainly Jesus included 'arrogance' among the evils which issue from our hearts and defile us.<sup>[57]</sup> In consequence, he found it necessary in his teaching to combat self-righteousness. For example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector he emphasized divine mercy, not human merit, as the proper object of justifying faith; in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard he undermined the mentality of those who demand payment and resent grace; and he saw little children as models of the humility which receives the kingdom as a free, unmerited gift.<sup>[58]</sup>

As for the apostle Paul, since he was well acquainted with the subtle pride of his own heart, could he not sniff it out in others, even when it hid under the cloak of religion?

In the end, however, it comes back to the question of exegesis. It is universally agreed that Paul's gospel in Romans was antithetical. He was expounding it over against some alternative. But what was this? We must allow Paul to speak for himself, and not make him say what either old traditions or new perspectives want him to say. It is hard to see how any interpretation of Paul can explain away either his negative conclusion that 'no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law' (3:20), or his positive affirmation that sinners are 'justified freely by his grace' (3:24).

The debate about Paul in general and Romans in particular is now focused on the purpose and place of the law. A note of pessimism characterizes the writing of some contemporary scholars, since they are not persuaded that Paul knew his own mind on this topic. Professor Sanders is prepared to concede that Paul was 'a coherent thinker', while adding immediately that he was 'not a systematic theologian'.<sup>[59]</sup> Dr Heikki Räisänen, the Finnish theologian, is a good deal less complimentary. 'Contradictions and tensions have to be *accepted*', he writes, 'as *constant* features of Paul's theology of the law.'<sup>[60]</sup> In particular, Paul is said to have been inconsistent about the present status of the law. On the one hand, he states 'in unambiguous terms that the law has been abolished',<sup>[61]</sup> while on the other he claims that it is fulfilled in the lives of Christians. Thus Paul contradicts himself, asserting 'both the abolition of the law and also its permanently normative character'.<sup>[62]</sup> Also, 'we find Paul struggling with the problem that a *divine* institution has been *abolished* through what God has done in Christ ...'. Most of Paul's difficulties are attributable to this. He even 'tries to hush up the abolition' by insisting that his teaching 'upholds' and 'fulfils' the law. But how can it be fulfilled by being set aside?<sup>[63]</sup>

The difficulties which Dr Räisänen finds, however, seem to be more in his own mind than in Paul's. It is true of course that, when Paul is responding to different situations, he makes different emphases. But it is not impossible to resolve the apparent discrepancies, as I hope will become clear in the exposition of the text. Our deliverance from the law is a rescue from its curse and its bondage, and so relates to the two particular functions of justification and sanctification. In both areas we are under grace, not law. For justification we look to the cross, not the law, and for sanctification to the Spirit, not the law. It is only by the Spirit that the law can be fulfilled in us.<sup>[64]</sup>

Professor James Dunn seems to have accepted the main theses of K. Stendahl, E. P. Sanders and H. Räisänen, and has sought to develop them further, especially in relation to the law. In a famous paper entitled *The New Perspective on Paul* (1983), summarized in the introduction to his commentary, he portrays Paul in Romans as being in dialogue with himself, the Jewish rabbi with the Christian apostle. When he declared that nobody could be justified 'by the works of the law', he was not referring to 'good works' in a general and meritorious sense. He was thinking rather of circumcision, the sabbath and the food laws, which 'functioned as an "identity marker" and "boundary", reinforcing Israel's sense of distinctiveness and distinguishing Israel from the surrounding nations'. Further, this 'sense of distinctiveness' was accompanied by a 'sense of privilege'. The reason Paul was negative to 'the works of the law' was not that they were thought to earn salvation, but that (a) they led to a boastful pride in Israel's favoured status, and (b) they fostered an ethnic exclusiveness incompatible with the inclusion of the Gentiles, to which he was committed.<sup>[65]</sup>

There can be no doubt that Paul saw these two dangers clearly. But Dr Stephen Westerholm is right, in his fine survey *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (1988), to question aspects of this reconstruction. For Paul, he argues, used 'law' and 'works of law' interchangeably, so that his reference was wider than to particular Jewish rituals; it was boasting in good works, not just in favoured status, which Paul opposed, as is clear from the case of Abraham (3:27; 4:1-5); and 'the fundamental principle affirmed by Paul's thesis of justification by faith, not works of the law, is that of humanity's dependence on divine grace ...'.<sup>[66]</sup>

Clearly the last word has not yet been spoken or written about these controversial issues in Romans. We may not feel able to agree that Paul's pre-conversion conscience was as cloudless as is now being claimed, or that he was as muddled over the law, and as preoccupied with its ritual regulations, as some are arguing; or that first-century Judaism was completely free from notions of merit and of works-righteousness. But we can be profoundly thankful for the scholarly insistence that the Gentile question is central to Romans. The redefinition and reconstitution of the people of God, as comprising Jewish and Gentile believers on equal terms, is a critical theme which pervades the letter.

### 3. Paul's purposes in writing

The older commentators tended to assume that Paul was providing in Romans what Philip Melancthon termed 'a compendium of Christian doctrine', somewhat detached from any particular socio-historical context. Contemporary

scholars, on the other hand, have tended to over-react to this, and to focus entirely on the transient situation of writer and readers. Not all have made this mistake, however. Professor Bruce called Romans 'a sustained and coherent statement of the gospel'.<sup>[67]</sup> Professor Cranfield has described it as 'a theological whole from which nothing at all substantial can be taken away without some measure of disfigurement or distortion'.<sup>[68]</sup> And Günther Bornkamm could refer to Romans as 'the last will and testament of the apostle Paul'.<sup>[69]</sup>

Nevertheless, all the New Testament documents (the gospels, the Acts and the Revelation as well as the letters) were written from within a particular situation. And this situation concerned partly the circumstances in which the author found himself, partly those of his intended readers, and usually a combination of both. It is these which help us to grasp what prompted each author to write and why he wrote what he did write. Romans is no exception to this general rule, although Paul nowhere spells out his reasons in detail. So different reconstructions have been attempted.

In his helpful monograph *The Reasons for Romans* Dr Alexander Wedderburn has urged that three pairs of factors need to be borne in mind—both the epistolary framework of Romans (its beginning and end) and its theological substance in the middle, both Paul's situation and the Roman church's, both the Jewish and the Gentile sections of the church, and their particular problems.<sup>[70]</sup>

What, then, were Paul's own circumstances? He is probably writing from Corinth during those three months which he spent 'in Greece'<sup>[71]</sup> just before sailing east. He mentions three places which he is intending to visit. The first is Jerusalem, taking with him the money which the Greek churches have contributed for the poverty-stricken Christians in Judea (15:25f.). The second is Rome itself. Having been frustrated in his previous attempts to visit the Christians in Rome, he is confident that this time he will be successful (1:11f.; 15:23f.). Thirdly, he plans to go on to Spain, in order to continue his pioneer missionary work 'where Christ was not known' (15:20, 24, 28). His most obvious purposes in writing were related to these three destinations.

Indeed, Paul thought of Rome, being situated between Jerusalem and Spain, as a place of refreshment after he had been to Jerusalem and a place of preparation *en route* for Spain. In other words, his visits to Jerusalem and Spain were of special significance to him because they expressed his two continuing commitments: to the welfare of Israel (Jerusalem) and to the Gentile mission (Spain).

Paul was evidently apprehensive about his forthcoming visit to Jerusalem. He had invested much thought, time and energy in promoting his collection, and had staked his personal prestige on it. It was to him more than an expression of Christian generosity.<sup>[72]</sup> It was a symbol of Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ, and of an appropriate reciprocity (Gentiles sharing with Jews their material blessings, having first shared in their spiritual blessings, 15:27). So he urged the Roman Christians to join him in his prayer-struggle (15:30), not only for his personal safety, that he might be 'rescued from the unbelievers in Judea', but especially for the success of his mission, that his service might be 'acceptable to the saints there' (15:31). Humanly speaking, its acceptability was in doubt. Many Jewish Christians regarded him with deep suspicion. Some condemned him for disloyalty to his Jewish heritage, since in his evangelization of Gentiles he championed their freedom from the necessity of circumcision and law-observance. For such Jewish Christians, to accept the offering which Paul was taking to Jerusalem would be tantamount to endorsing his liberal policy. The apostle felt the need of support from Rome's mixed Jewish-Gentile Christian community; he wrote to them to solicit their prayers.

If Paul's immediate destination was Jerusalem, his ultimate destination was Spain. The fact was that his evangelization of the four provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia was now complete, since 'from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum' (approximately modern Albania), he had fully preached the gospel (15:19b). So what next? His ambition, which indeed had become his fixed policy, was to evangelize only 'where Christ was not known', so that he would 'not be building on someone else's foundation' (15:20). Now, therefore, he put these two things together (the fact and the policy) and concluded that there was 'no more place' for him 'to work in these regions' (15:23). In consequence, his sights were set on Spain, which was regarded as part of the western frontier of the Roman Empire, and to which, so far as he knew, the gospel had not yet penetrated.

But he could have decided to go to Spain without either visiting Rome on the way or even telling the Romans his plans. So why did he write to them? Surely because he felt the need of their fellowship. Rome was about two-thirds of the way from Jerusalem to Spain. He asked therefore if they would 'assist' him on his journey there (15:24), presumably with their encouragement, financial support and prayers. Indeed, he wanted 'to use Rome as a base of operations in the Western Mediterranean, much as he had used Antioch (originally) as a base in the East'.<sup>[73]</sup>

So Paul's intermediate destination, between Jerusalem and Spain, was to be Rome. A church had already come into being there, perhaps through Jewish Christians who had returned home from Jerusalem after Pentecost.<sup>[74]</sup> But who the pioneer, church-planting missionary may have been is not known. If Paul's planned visit seems inconsistent with his policy not to build on another's foundation, we can only guess that Rome was not regarded as any one person's territory and/or that he was influenced by the countervailing truth that as the specially appointed apostle to the Gentiles (1:5f.; 11:13; 15:15f.) it would be appropriate for him to minister in the metropolis of the Gentile world (1:11f.), although he tactfully added that he would visit them only 'while passing through' (15:24, 28).

We still have to ask why he should write to them, however. It was partly no doubt to prepare them for his visit. More than that, because he had not visited Rome before, and because most of the church members there were not known to him, he saw the need to establish his apostolic credentials by giving a full account of his gospel. How he did this was determined in the main by 'the inner logic of the gospel'.<sup>[75]</sup> but at the same time he was addressing his readers' concerns

and responding to criticism, as will emerge in the next paragraphs. Meanwhile, with regard to his own situation, he sent them a threefold request—to pray that his service in Jerusalem would be acceptable, to help him on his way to Spain, and to receive him during his stopover in Rome as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's purposes in writing to the Romans are not traceable only to his own situation, however, and in particular to his plans to travel to Jerusalem, Rome and Spain. His letter also arose from the situation in which the Roman Christians found themselves. What was that?

Even the most casual reading of Romans betrays the fact that the church in Rome was a mixed community consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, with Gentiles in the majority (1:5f., 13; 11:13), and that there was considerable conflict between these groups. It is further recognized that this conflict was primarily not ethnic (different races and cultures), but theological (different convictions about the status of God's covenant and law, and so about salvation). Some scholars suggest that the house churches in the city (see 16:5, and also verses 14 and 15 which refer to the Christians 'with them') may have represented these different doctrinal positions. It may also be that the 'disturbances' made by the Jews in Rome 'at the instigation of Chrestus' (probably meaning Christ), which were mentioned by Suetonius,<sup>[76]</sup> and which led to their expulsion from Rome in AD 49 by the Emperor Claudius,<sup>[77]</sup> were due to this same conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

What then was the theological issue which lay beneath the ethnic and cultural tensions between Jews and Gentiles in Rome? Dr Wedderburn refers to the Jewish Christians in Rome as representatives of 'Judaizing Christianity', since they regarded Christianity 'as simply part of Judaism' and required their followers to 'observe the Jewish law',<sup>[78]</sup> while the Gentile Christians he calls 'supporters of a law-free gospel'.<sup>[79]</sup> Moreover, he and many other scholars have also seen in the former group 'the weak' and in the latter 'the strong' whom Paul addresses in chapters 14–15, although this may well be an over-simplification. The 'weak in faith', who scrupulously observed the ceremonial regulations like the food laws, condemned Paul for not doing so. They may also have regarded themselves as the sole beneficiaries of God's promises, and were not at all in favour of Gentile evangelization unless the converts were prepared to be circumcised and observe the law in full.<sup>[80]</sup> To them Paul was both a traitor to the covenant and an enemy of the law (that is, an 'antinomian'). The 'strong in faith', on the other hand, who like Paul himself were champions of a 'law-free gospel', made the mistake of despising the weak for being still in unnecessary bondage to the law. Thus the Jewish Christians were proud of their favoured status, and the Gentile Christians of their freedom, so that Paul saw the need to humble them both.

Echoes of this controversy, in both its theological and its practical implications, may be heard rumbling throughout Romans. And Paul is seen from beginning to end as an authentic peacemaker, pouring oil on troubled waters, anxious to preserve both truth and peace without sacrificing either to the other. He himself had, of course, a foot in both camps. On the one hand, he was a patriotic Jew ('I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers ... the people of Israel', 9:3). On the other hand, he had been specially commissioned as the apostle to the Gentiles ('I am talking to you Gentiles ... as I am the apostle to the Gentiles ...', 11:13; cf. 1:5; 15:15f.). So he was in a unique position to be an agent of reconciliation. He was determined to make a full and fresh statement of the apostolic gospel, which would not compromise any of its revealed truths, but which would at the same time resolve the conflict between Jews and Gentiles over the covenant and the law, and so promote the unity of the church.

In his ministry of reconciliation, therefore, Paul develops two paramount themes, and interweaves them beautifully. The first is the justification of guilty sinners by God's grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, irrespective of either status or works. This is the most humbling and levelling of all Christian truths and experiences, and so is the fundamental basis of Christian unity. In fact, as Martin Hengel has written, 'although people nowadays are fond of asserting otherwise, no-one understood the real essence of Pauline theology, the salvation given *sola gratia*, by grace alone, better than Augustine and Martin Luther.'<sup>[81]</sup>

Paul's second theme is the consequent redefinition of the people of God, no longer according to descent, circumcision or culture, but according to faith in Jesus, so that all believers are the true children of Abraham, regardless of their ethnic origin or religious practice. So 'there is no difference' now between Jews and Gentiles, either in the fact of their sin and guilt or in Christ's offer and gift of salvation (e.g. 3:21f., 27f.; 4:9f.; 10:11f.). Indeed, 'the single most important theme of Romans is the equality of Jews and Gentiles'.<sup>[82]</sup>

And linked with this is the continuing validity both of God's covenant (which now embraces Gentiles and demonstrates his faithfulness) and of his law (so that, although 'released' from it as the way of salvation, we yet through the Spirit 'fulfil' it as the revelation of God's holy will).

A brief overview of the letter and its argument will throw further light on the intertwining of these related themes.

#### 4. A brief overview of Romans

Paul's two main themes—the integrity of the gospel committed to him and the solidarity of Jews and Gentiles in the messianic community—are already apparent in the first half of the letter's first chapter.

Paul calls the good news 'the gospel of God' (1) because he is its author, and 'the gospel of his Son' (9) because he is its substance. In verses 1–5 he focuses on the person of Jesus Christ, David's son by descent and powerfully declared God's Son by the resurrection. In verse 16 he focuses on his work, since the gospel is God's power for the salvation of everyone who believes, 'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile'.

In between these succinct statements of the gospel, Paul seeks to establish a personal relationship with his readers. He is writing to 'all in Rome' who are believers (7), irrespective of their ethnic origin, although he knows that the majority of

them are Gentiles (13). He thanks God for all of them, he prays for them constantly, he longs to see them, and he has tried many times (so far unsuccessfully) to visit them (8–13). He feels under obligation to preach the gospel in the capital city of the world. Indeed, he is eager to do so, because in the gospel God's righteous way of 'righteousness' the unrighteous has been revealed (14–17).

### ***The wrath of God (1:18–3:20)***

The revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel is necessary because of the revelation of his wrath against unrighteousness (18). The wrath of God, his pure and perfect antagonism to evil, is directed against all those who deliberately suppress what they know to be true and right, in order to go their own way. For everybody has some knowledge of God and of goodness, whether through the created world (19f.), or through conscience (32), or through the moral law written on human hearts (2:12f.), or through the law of Moses committed to the Jews (2:17f.).

The apostle thus divides the human race into three sections—depraved pagan society (1:18–32), critical moralizers whether Jews or Gentiles (2:1–16), and well-instructed, self-confident Jews (2:17–3:8). He then concludes by accusing the whole human race (3:9–20). In each case his argument is the same, that nobody lives up to the knowledge which he or she has. Even the special privileges of the Jews do not exempt them from divine judgment. No, 'Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin' (3:9), 'for God does not show favouritism' (2:11). All human beings are sinful, guilty and without excuse before God. The picture is one of unrelieved darkness.

### ***The grace of God (3:21–8:39)***

The 'But now' of 3:21 is one of the great adversatives of the Bible. For into the universal darkness of human sin and guilt the light of the gospel has shone. Paul again calls it 'the righteousness of [or from] God' (as in 1:17), that is, his just justification of the unjust. This is possible only through the cross, in which God has demonstrated his justice (3:25f.) as well as his love (5:8), and it is available to 'all who believe' (3:22), whether Jews or Gentiles. In explaining the cross, Paul resorts to the key words 'propitiation', 'redemption' and 'justification'. And then, in responding to Jewish objections (3:27–31), he argues that because justification is by faith alone, there can be no boasting before God, no discrimination between Jews and Gentiles and no disregard for the law.

Romans 4 is a brilliant essay in which Paul proves that Abraham, the founding father of Israel, was himself justified neither by his works (4–8), nor by his circumcision (9–12), nor by the law (13–15), but by faith. In consequence, Abraham is now 'the father of all who believe', irrespective of whether they are Jews or Gentiles (11, 16–25). The divine impartiality is evident.

Having established that God justifies even the wicked by faith (4:5), Paul affirms the great blessings enjoyed by his justified people (5:1–11). *Therefore*, he begins, we have peace with God, we are standing in his grace, and we rejoice in the prospect of seeing and sharing his glory. Even suffering does not shake our confidence, because of God's love which he has both poured into our hearts through his Spirit (5) and proved on the cross through his Son (8). Because of what God has already done for us, we dare to say that 'we shall be saved' on the last day (9–10).

Two human communities have now been portrayed, the one characterized by sin and guilt, the other by grace and faith. The head of the old humanity is Adam, the head of the new is Christ. So then, with almost mathematical precision, Paul compares and contrasts them (5:12–21). The comparison is simple. In both cases the one deed of one man has affected enormous numbers of people. The contrast, however, is much more significant. Whereas Adam's disobedience brought condemnation and death, Christ's obedience has brought justification and life. Indeed, Christ's saving work will prove far more successful than Adam's destructiveness.

In the middle of this antithesis between Adam and Christ, Paul introduces Moses: 'the law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (20). Both statements will have sounded shocking in Jewish ears, because they will have seemed incorrigibly antinomian. The first appeared to blame sin on the law, and the second to minimize sin by magnifying grace. Did Paul's gospel both disparage the law and encourage sin? Paul answers the second charge in Romans 6, and the first in Romans 7.

Twice in Romans 6 (verses 1 and 15) we hear Paul's critic asking whether Paul meant that we may go on sinning so that God's grace may go on forgiving. Both times Paul responds with an outraged 'God forbid!' For Christians to ask such a question shows that they have never understood the meaning of either their baptism (1–14) or their conversion (15–23). Did they not know that their baptism signified union with Christ in his death, that his death was a death 'unto sin' (meeting its demand, paying its penalty), and that they had shared in his resurrection too? By union with Christ they were themselves 'dead unto sin and alive unto God'. How then could they go on living in what they had died to? It was similar with their conversion. Had they not decisively offered themselves to God as his slaves? Then how could they contemplate lapsing into their old slavery to sin? Our baptism and conversion have both closed the door on to the old life, and opened a door on to a new life. It is not impossible for us to go back, but it is inconceivable that we should. Far from encouraging sin, grace prohibits it.

Paul's critics were also disturbed by his teaching on the law. So he clarifies it in Romans 7. He makes three points. First (1–6), Christians have 'died to the law' in Christ, just as they have 'died to sin'. Consequently, they are 'released' from the law, that is, from its condemnation, and are now free not to sin but to serve in the new way of the Spirit. Secondly, writing (I believe) out of his own past (7–13), Paul argues that, although the law reveals, provokes and condemns sin, it is not responsible for sin or death. No, the law is holy. Paul exonerates the law.

Thirdly (14–25), Paul describes in vivid terms a painful, continuing, inner moral struggle. Whether the 'wretched man' who cries for deliverance is a regenerate Christian or unregenerate (I take a third position), and whether he is Paul himself or somebody Paul is impersonating, his purpose in this paragraph is to demonstrate the weakness of the law. His defeat is due neither to the law (which is holy), nor even to his true self, but to 'sin living in me' (17, 20), and this the law

has no power to control. But now (8:1–4) God has done through his Son and Spirit what the law, weakened by our sinful nature, was unable to do. In particular the remedy for indwelling sin is the indwelling Spirit (8:9), who has not been mentioned in chapter 7, apart from verse 6. Thus for both justification and sanctification we are ‘not under law but under grace’.

As Romans 7 is full of the law, so Romans 8 is full of the Spirit. During the first half of the chapter Paul describes some of the very varied ministries of the Holy Spirit—liberating us, indwelling us, giving us life, leading us into self-control, witnessing with our spirit that we are God’s children, and interceding for us. The fact that we are God’s children reminds Paul that we are therefore also his heirs, and that suffering is the only road to glory. He then draws a parallel between the sufferings and glory of God’s creation and the sufferings and glory of God’s children. The creation has been subjected to frustration, he writes. But one day it will be liberated from its bondage. Meanwhile the creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth, and we groan with it. We also wait with eager yet patient expectation for the final redemption of the universe, including our bodies.

In the last twelve verses of Romans 8 the apostle rises to sublime heights of Christian confidence. He expresses five convictions about God at work for our good, that is, for our final salvation (28). He outlines five stages of God’s purpose from a past to a future eternity (29–30). And he flings out five defiant questions to which there is no answer. He thus fortifies us with fifteen assurances of God’s steadfast love, from which nothing can ever separate us.

### ***The plan of God (9–11)***

Throughout the first half of his letter Paul has forgotten neither the ethnic mix of the Roman church nor the tensions which kept surfacing between the Jewish Christian minority and the Gentile Christian majority. The time has come for him to address head-on the underlying theological problem. How is it that the Jewish people as a whole had rejected their Messiah? How could their unbelief be reconciled with God’s covenant and promises? How also did the inclusion of the Gentiles fit in with God’s plan? It is notable that each of these three chapters begins with a personal and emotional statement of Paul’s love for Israel—his anguish over their alienation (9:1f.), his longing for their salvation (10:1) and his own continuing Jewishness (11:1).

In chapter 9 Paul defends God’s covenant loyalty on the ground that his promises were not addressed to all Jacob’s descendants, but to Israel within Israel, a remnant, since he has always worked according to his ‘purpose of election’ (11). This can be seen not only in his choosing Isaac rather than Ishmael, and Jacob rather than Esau, but also in his having mercy on Moses, while hardening Pharaoh (14–18), even though this was a judicial surrender of Pharaoh to the wilful hardening of his own heart. If we still have problems over election, we must remember that it is always inappropriate for human beings to talk back to God (19–21), that we must let God be God in his resolve to make known his power and mercy (22–23), and that Scripture itself foretold the calling of Gentiles as well as Jews to be his people (24–29).

It is plain from the end of chapter 9 and from chapter 10, however, that Israel’s unbelief cannot be explained *tout simple* by God’s purpose of election. For Paul goes on to affirm that Israel ‘stumbled over the stumbling-stone’, namely Christ and his cross. This is to accuse Israel of a proud unwillingness to submit to God’s way of salvation, and of a religious zeal which was not based on knowledge (9:30–10:4). Paul goes on to contrast ‘the righteousness that is by the law’ with ‘the righteousness that is by faith’, and to emphasize from a skilful use of Deuteronomy 30 the ready accessibility of Christ to faith. There is no need for anybody to go in search of Christ, since he has come and died and risen, and is close to any who will call on him (5–11). Moreover, there is no difference in this between Jew and Gentile, since the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him (12–13). But, for this, evangelism is necessary (14–15). Why then did Israel not accept the good news? It is not that they had not heard it or understood it. Why then? It is that all day long God had stretched out his hands to welcome them, but they were ‘disobedient and obstinate’ (16–21). So then, the unbelief of Israel, which in Romans 9 is attributed to God’s purpose of election, in Romans 10 is attributed to her pride, ignorance and stubbornness. The tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility constitutes an antimony which the finite mind cannot fathom.

With chapter 11 Paul looks into the future. He declares that Israel’s fall is neither total, since there is a believing remnant (1–10), nor final, since God has not rejected his people and they will recover (11). If through Israel’s fall salvation has come to the Gentiles, now through the Gentiles’ salvation Israel will be made envious (12). Indeed, Paul sees his evangelistic ministry in terms of arousing his own people to envy, in order to save some of them (13–14). And then Israel’s ‘fulness’ will bring ‘much greater riches’ to the world. Paul goes on to develop his allegory of the olive tree, and teaches two lessons from it. The first is a warning to the Gentiles (the wild olive shoot which has been grafted in) not to presume or boast (17–22). And the second is a promise to Israel (the natural branches) that if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted back in again (23–24). Paul’s vision for the future, which he calls a ‘mystery’ or revelation, is that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, ‘all Israel will be saved’ as well (25–27). And the ground of his assurance is that ‘God’s gifts and call are irrevocable’ (29). So we may confidently expect the ‘fulness’ of both Jews and Gentiles to be gathered in (12, 25). Indeed, God will ‘have mercy on them all’ (32), meaning not everybody without exception but rather both Jews and Gentiles without distinction. It is not surprising that this prospect leads Paul to break out into a doxology, in which he praises God for the depth of both his riches and his wisdom (33–36).

### ***The will of God (12:1–15:13)***

Calling the Roman Christians his ‘brothers’ (the old ethnic distinctions having been abolished), Paul now addresses to them an eloquent appeal. He bases it on ‘the mercies of God’ which he has been expounding, and he calls for both the consecration of their bodies and the renewal of their minds. He sets before them the stark alternative which has always and everywhere confronted the people of God, either to conform to the pattern of this world or to be transformed by

renewed minds which discern God's 'good, pleasing and perfect will'. The choice is between the world's fashion and the Lord's will.

In the chapters which follow it becomes clear that God's good will is concerned with all our relationships, which are radically changed by the gospel. Paul treats eight of them, namely, our relationship to God, ourselves, each other, our enemies, the state, the law, the last day and the 'weak'. Our renewed minds, which begin by seeking God's will (1-2), are also to evaluate ourselves and our gifts soberly, and not to have either too high or too low an opinion of ourselves (3-8). Our relationship to one another follows naturally from the mutual ministries which our gifts make possible. The love which binds members of the Christian family together will include sincerity, affection, honour, patience, hospitality, sympathy, harmony and humility (9-16).

Our relationship to our enemies or to evildoers comes next (17-21). Echoing the teaching of Jesus, Paul writes that we are not to retaliate or take revenge, but rather to leave the punishment of evil to God, since it is his prerogative, and meanwhile to seek peace, serve our enemies and overcome evil with good. Our relationship with the governing authorities (13:1-7) may well have been suggested to Paul's mind by his reference to God's wrath (12:19). If the punishment of evil is God's prerogative, one of the ways in which he does it is through the state's administration of justice, since the magistrate is God's 'minister' to punish the wrongdoer. The state also has a positive role to promote and reward good in the community. Our submission to the authorities is certainly not unconditional, however. If the state misuses its God-given authority, to command what God forbids or forbid what God commands, our clear Christian duty is to disobey the state in order to obey God.

Verses 8-10 revert to love, and teach that loving our neighbour is both an unpaid debt and the fulfilment of the law. For though we are 'not under law', in the sense that we look to Christ for justification and to the Holy Spirit for sanctification, we are still called to 'fulfil the law' in daily obedience to God's commandments. In this sense we must not set the Spirit and the law over against each other, since the Holy Spirit writes the law in our hearts. And this primacy of love is the more urgent as the day of Christ's return approaches. We are to wake up, to get up, to dress, and to live as those who belong to the day (verses 11-14).

Our relationship with the 'weak' is the one Paul treats at greatest length (14:1-15:13). They are evidently weak in faith or conviction, rather than in will or character. They must have been mainly Jewish Christians, who believed they should still observe both the food laws and the feasts and fasts of the Jewish calendar. Paul himself is one of the 'strong' and identifies with their position. His educated conscience tells him that foods and days are matters of secondary importance. But he refuses to ride roughshod over the sensitive consciences of the weak. His overall exhortation to the church is to 'accept' the weak as God has done (14:1, 3) and to 'accept' one another as Christ has done (15:7). If they welcome the weak into their hearts and their fellowship, they will not despise them, or condemn them, or damage them by persuading them to go against their consciences.

The most notable feature of these practical instructions is that Paul grounds them on his Christology, and in particular on the death, resurrection and parousia of Jesus. The weak are brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. Christ rose to be their Lord, and we have no right to interfere with his servants. He is also coming to be our judge; so we should not play the role of judge ourselves. We should also follow the example of Christ who did not please himself but became a servant—indeed a servant of both Jews and Gentiles. So Paul leaves his readers with a beautiful vision of the weak and the strong, Jewish believers and Gentile believers, who are bound together by such a 'spirit of unity' that 'with one heart and mouth' they glorify God together (15:5-6).

In his conclusion Paul describes his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles, together with his policy to preach the gospel only where Christ is not known (15:14-22); he shares with them his travel plans to visit them on his way to Spain, but first to take the offering to Jerusalem as a symbol of Jewish—Gentile solidarity (15:23-29); and he asks for their prayers (15:30-33). He then commends Phoebe to them, who is assumed to be the bearer of the letter to Rome (16:1-2); he sends greetings to twenty-six named individuals (16:3-16), men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, who help us to grasp the extraordinary unity-in-diversity enjoyed by the church in Rome; he warns them against false teachers (16:17-20); he sends messages from eight individuals who are with him in Corinth (16:21-24); and he expresses a final doxology. Although the doxology's syntax is a little complex, its content is marvellous. It enables the apostle to end where he began (1:1-5), since the letter's introduction and conclusion both refer to the gospel of Christ, the commission of God, the outreach to the nations and the summons to the obedience of faith.

## Introduction: The gospel of God and Paul's eagerness to share it (Romans 1:1–17)

Paul begins his letter in a very personal way. The personal pronoun and possessive (I, me, my) occur more than twenty times in these opening verses. He is evidently anxious from the start to establish a close relationship with his readers. His introduction is in three parts, which I will call 'Paul and the gospel' (1–6), 'Paul and the Romans' (7–13) and 'Paul and evangelism' (14–17).

### 1. Paul and the gospel (1:1–6)

Letter-writing conventions vary from culture to culture. Our modern way is to address our correspondent first ('Dear Joan') and to identify ourselves only at the end ('Yours sincerely, John'). In the ancient world, however, the custom was to reverse the order, the writer announcing himself or herself first and the correspondent next ('John to Joan, greetings!'). Paul normally followed the convention of his day, but here he deviates from it by giving a much more elaborate description of himself than usual, in relation to the gospel. The reason is probably that he did not found the church in Rome. Nor has he yet visited it. He feels the need, therefore, to establish his credentials as an apostle and to summarize his gospel. *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God*, he begins.

'Servant' is *doulos* and should really be translated 'slave'. In the Old Testament there was an honourable succession of individual Israelites, beginning with Moses and Joshua, who called themselves Yahweh's 'servants' or 'slaves' (e.g. 'O LORD, truly I am your servant'),<sup>1</sup> while Yahweh also designated Israel collectively 'my servant'.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, however, it is remarkable how easily the title 'Lord' has been transferred from Yahweh to Jesus (e.g. verses 4, 7), while the Lord's 'servants' are no longer Israel, but all his people, irrespective of whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

'Apostle', on the other hand, was a distinctively Christian name from the beginning, in that Jesus himself chose it as his designation of the Twelve,<sup>3</sup> and Paul claimed to have been added to their number.<sup>4</sup> The distinctive qualifications of the apostles were that they were directly and personally called and commissioned by Jesus, that they were eye-witnesses of the historical Jesus, at least (and specially) of his resurrection,<sup>5</sup> and that they were sent out by him to preach with his authority. The New Testament apostle thus resembled both the Old Testament prophet, who was 'called' and 'sent' by Yahweh to speak in his name, and the *shaliach* of rabbinic Judaism, who was 'an authorized representative or delegate, legally empowered to act (within prescribed limits) on behalf of his principal'.<sup>6</sup> It is against this double background that the apostle's authoritative teaching role is to be understood.

Paul's twofold designation as 'slave' and 'apostle' is particularly striking when these words are contrasted with one another. First, 'slave' is a title of great humility; it expressed Paul's sense of personal insignificance, without rights of his own, having been purchased to belong to Christ. 'Apostle', on the other hand, was a title of great authority; it expressed his sense of official privilege and dignity by reason of his appointment by Jesus Christ. Secondly, 'slave' is a general Christian word (every disciple looks to Jesus Christ as Lord), whereas 'apostle' is a special title (reserved for the Twelve and Paul and perhaps one or two others such as James). As an apostle, he had been *set apart for the gospel of God*.

How did Paul intend his readers to understand his reference to having been set apart? The verb *aphōrismenos* has the same root meaning as 'Pharisee' (*pharisaios*). Was this deliberate, since Paul had been a Pharisee?<sup>7</sup> Anders Nygren, for example, reflecting his Lutheran tradition, writes that 'as a Pharisee Paul had set himself apart for the law, but now God had set him apart for ... the gospel ... Thus in the very first verse of this epistle we encounter the letter's basic juxtaposition of law and gospel which, from one point of view, is the theme of Romans.'<sup>8</sup> It is questionable, however, whether Paul's readers would have picked up this play on words. In his own mind Paul is more likely to have seen a parallel between his consecration to be an apostle and Jeremiah's to be a prophet. For in Galatians Paul wrote that God had set him apart (using the same word) from birth, and then called him to preach Christ to the Gentiles,<sup>9</sup> just as God had said to Jeremiah: 'Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'<sup>10</sup> We need, therefore, to think of Paul's Damascus road encounter with Christ not only as his conversion but as his commissioning to be an apostle (*egō apostellō se*, 'I send you', 'I make you an apostle'),<sup>11</sup> and especially to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's two verbal expressions, then, *called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God*, belong inseparably together. One cannot think of 'apostle' without thinking of 'gospel', and *vice versa*. As an apostle, it was Paul's responsibility to receive, formulate, defend, maintain and proclaim the gospel, and so combine the roles of trustee, advocate and herald. As Professor Cranfield has put it, the apostle's function was 'to serve the gospel by an authoritative and normative proclamation of it'.<sup>12</sup>

Paul now proceeds to give a six-point analysis of the gospel, to which he has been set apart.

#### 1. The origin of the gospel is God

'God is the most important word in this epistle,' Dr Leon Morris has written. 'Romans is a book about God. No topic is treated with anything like the frequency of God. Everything Paul touches in this letter he relates to God ... There is nothing like it elsewhere.'<sup>13</sup> So the Christian good news is *the gospel of God*. The apostles did not invent it; it was revealed and entrusted to them by God.

This is still the first and most basic conviction which underlies all authentic evangelism. What we have to share with others is neither a miscellany of human speculations, nor one more religion to add to the rest, nor really a religion at all. It is rather *the gospel of God*, God's own good news for a lost world. Without this conviction, evangelism is evacuated of its content, purpose and drive.

## 2. The attestation of the gospel is Scripture

Verse 2: *the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures*. That is to say, although God revealed the gospel to the apostles, it did not come to them as a complete novelty, because he had already promised it through his prophets in Old Testament Scripture. There is, in fact, an essential continuity between the Old Testament and the New. Jesus himself was quite clear that the Scriptures bore witness to him, that he was the son of man of Daniel<sup>7</sup> and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, and that, as it had been written, he had to suffer in order to enter into his glory.<sup>14</sup> In the Acts we hear Peter quoting the Old Testament in reference to Jesus' resurrection, exaltation and gift of the Spirit.<sup>15</sup> We also watch Paul reasoning with people out of the Scriptures that the Christ must suffer and rise, and that he was Jesus.<sup>16</sup> He similarly insisted that it was 'according to the Scriptures' that Christ both died for our sins and was raised on the third day.<sup>17</sup> It was thus that both the law and the prophets bore witness to the gospel (3:21; cf. 1:17).

We have reason, then, to be thankful that the gospel of God has a double attestation, namely the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New. Both bear witness to Jesus Christ, and this is what Paul comes to next.

## 3. The substance of the gospel is Jesus Christ

If we bring verses 1 and 3 together, by omitting the parenthesis of verse 2, we are left with the statement that Paul was set apart for the gospel of God *regarding his Son*. For the gospel of God is 'the gospel of his Son' (9). God's good news is about Jesus. As Luther put it in his gloss on this verse: 'Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scripture, that is, that everything must be understood in relation to Christ.'<sup>18</sup> Calvin writes similarly that 'the whole gospel is contained in Christ'. Therefore, 'to move even a step from Christ means to withdraw oneself from the gospel.'<sup>19</sup>

Paul now describes him by two contrasting clauses: *who as to his human nature was a descendant of David* (3), and *who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord* (4). Here are references, direct or indirect, to the birth (descended from David), death (presupposed by his resurrection), resurrection from the dead, and reign (on David's throne) of Jesus Christ. So neatly and carefully constructed is the parallelism that many scholars have guessed that Paul is making use of a fragment from an early creed. If so, he now gives it his apostolic endorsement. It expresses an antithesis between two titles (seed of David and Son of God), between two verbs (he 'became' or 'was born' David's descendant, but was *declared* or 'appointed' God's Son), and between two qualifying clauses (*kata sarka*, 'according to flesh', and *kata pneuma hagiōsynēs*, literally, 'according to spirit of holiness').

First, the two titles. 'Son of David' was a universally recognized messianic title.<sup>20</sup> So was 'Son of God', based particularly on Psalm 2:7. The way Jesus himself understood it, however, as seen both in his personal approach to God as 'Abba, Father' and in referring to himself absolutely as 'the Son',<sup>21</sup> already indicates that the designation is divine, not merely messianic. Paul evidently used it thus (not only in 1:3-4 and 9, but also e.g. in 5:10 and 8:3, 32). The two titles together speak, therefore, of his humanity and his deity.

Of the two verbs, the first causes little difficulty. Although it means no more than 'became', it evidently refers to Jesus' descent from David by birth (and maybe by adoption too, since Joseph acknowledged him as his son). The second verb, however, raises a problem. The translation *declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead* is readily intelligible. But the trouble is that *horizō* does not really (or usually) mean 'declare'. It is properly rendered 'appoint', as when God 'appointed' Jesus the judge of the world.<sup>22</sup> Yet the New Testament does not teach that Jesus was appointed, established or installed Son of God at or by the resurrection, since he has been the Son of God eternally. This leads to the suggestion that the words 'in power' should be attached to the noun 'Son of God' rather than to the verb 'appoint'. In this case Paul is affirming that Jesus was 'appointed Son-of-God-in-power'<sup>23</sup> or even 'declared to be the powerful Son of God' (BAGD). Nygren captures the antithesis well by writing: '*So the resurrection is the turning point in the existence of the Son of God*. Before that he was the Son of God in weakness and lowliness. Through the resurrection he becomes the Son of God in power.'<sup>24</sup>

The third contrast is in the two qualifying clauses 'according to flesh' and 'according to spirit of holiness'. Although 'flesh' has a variety of meanings for Paul, here it evidently refers to Jesus' human nature or physical descent, though perhaps with an undertone of its weakness or vulnerability over against the power implicit in his resurrection and deity. Some commentators then insist that, in order to preserve the parallelism, 'according to spirit of holiness' must be translated 'according to his divine nature' or at least 'according to his holy human spirit'. But 'Spirit of holiness' is not at all an obvious reference to Jesus' divine nature. Moreover, it was not only a part of him, whether his divine nature or his human spirit, which was raised from the dead or appointed Son-of-God-in-power by the resurrection. On the contrary, it was the whole Jesus Christ, body and spirit, human and divine.

Other commentators point out that 'Spirit of holiness' was a natural Hebraism for the Holy Spirit, and that there were

obvious links between the Holy Spirit and the resurrection, both because he is 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead' <sup>25</sup> and—more important—because it was the risen and exalted Christ who demonstrated his power and authority by pouring out the Spirit, <sup>26</sup> and who thus inaugurated the new era, which is the age of the Spirit.

It seems then that the two expressions 'according to the flesh' and 'according to the Spirit' refer not to the two natures of Jesus Christ (human and divine), but to the two stages of his ministry, pre-resurrection and post-resurrection, the first frail and the second powerful through the outpoured Spirit. So here is a balanced statement of both the humiliation and the exaltation, the weakness and the power of God's Son, his human descent traced to David, his divine sonship-in-power established by the resurrection and gift of the Spirit. Moreover, this unique person, seed of David and Son of God, weak and powerful, incarnate and exalted, is *Jesus* (a human, historical figure), *Christ* (the Messiah of Old Testament Scripture), *our Lord*, who owns and rules our lives. Perhaps we could add that Jesus' two titles, 'the Christ' and 'the Lord', will have specially appealed to Jewish and Gentile Christians respectively.

#### 4. The scope of the gospel is all the nations

Paul now comes back from his description of the gospel to his own apostleship and writes: *Through him (sc. the risen Christ) and for his name's sake* (a phrase to which I will return), *we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith* (5). It is unlikely that by using the plural 'we', Paul is wanting to associate the other apostles with him, since he nowhere mentions them in this letter. Probably it is an editorial 'we', or the 'we' of apostolic authority, by which in reality he was referring to himself. What then did he 'receive' from God through Christ? He calls it *grace and apostleship*, which in the context seems to mean 'the undeserved privilege of being an apostle'. For Paul always attributed his apostleship to God's gracious decision and appointment. <sup>27</sup>

As Paul goes on to state the purpose of his apostleship, he discloses further aspects of the gospel. He defines its scope as *all the Gentiles*. This seems to imply that the Christians in Rome were predominantly Gentile, since he specifically mentions them: *And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ* (6). Yet Paul will shortly describe the gospel as 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' (1:16). What he is affirming is that the gospel is for everybody; its scope is universal. He himself was a patriotic Jew, who retained his love for his people and longed passionately for their salvation (9:1f.; 10:1). At the same time, he had been called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. <sup>28</sup> We too, if we are to be committed to world mission, will have to be liberated from all pride of race, nation, tribe, caste and class, and acknowledge that God's gospel is for everybody, without exception and without distinction. This is a major theme of Romans.

#### 5. The purpose of the gospel is the obedience of faith

Literally, Paul writes that he has received his apostleship 'unto obedience of faith among all the nations'. So 'obedience of faith' is his definition of the response which the gospel demands. It is a particularly notable expression, coming as it does at the beginning and the end of Romans (see 16:26), since it is in Romans that Paul insists more strongly than anywhere else that justification is 'through faith alone'. Yet here he apparently writes that it is not by faith alone, but by 'obedience of faith'. Has he lost his bearings? Does the apostle now contradict himself? No, we must give him credit for consistency of thought.

Three main explanations of the phrase are offered. The first is that it means 'obedience to the faith', taking 'faith' here as a body of belief. And certainly this is a New Testament expression. <sup>29</sup> Further, the apostles do refer to conversion in terms of obedience to truth or doctrine. <sup>30</sup> But when 'faith' has this meaning, one would expect the definite article to be in place ('the faith'), whereas the whole context of Romans really demands a reference here to 'faith' (as in 8, 16–17).

The second possibility is that this is a genitive of 'equivalence', and that the expression should be translated 'the obedience which consists of faith'. As John Murray puts it, 'the faith which the apostleship was intended to promote was not an evanescent act of emotion but the commitment of wholehearted devotion to Christ and to the truth of his gospel'. <sup>31</sup> And yet, although faith and obedience do always belong together, they are not synonymous, and the New Testament usually maintains a distinction between them.

The third option is that the genitive is one of source or origin. So NIV renders it *the obedience that comes from faith*, which immediately reminds one of Abraham who 'by faith ... obeyed'. <sup>32</sup> At the same time we note that this is the obedience of faith, not the obedience of law. Perhaps, in fact, the second and third options do not exclude each other. For the proper response to the gospel is faith, indeed faith alone. Yet a true and living faith in Jesus Christ both includes within itself an element of submission (cf. 10:3), especially because its object is 'Jesus Christ our Lord' (4) or 'the Lord Jesus Christ' (7), and leads inevitably into a lifetime of obedience. That is why the response Paul looked for was a total, unreserved commitment to Jesus Christ, which he called 'the obedience of faith'. This is our answer to those who argue that it is possible to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour without surrendering to him as Lord. It is not. Certainly the Roman Christians had believed and obeyed, for Paul describes them as being *among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ* (6).

#### 6. The goal of the gospel is the honour of Christ's name

The words *for his name's sake*, which NIV places at the beginning of verse 5, actually come at the end of the Greek

sentence and so form something of a climax. Why did Paul desire to bring the nations to the obedience of faith? It was for the sake of the glory and honour of Christ's name. For God had 'exalted him to the highest place' and had given him 'the name that is above every name', in order that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord'.<sup>[33]</sup> If, therefore, God desires every knee to bow to Jesus and every tongue to confess him, so should we. We should be 'jealous' (as Scripture sometimes puts it) for the honour of his name—troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed, and all the time anxious and determined that it shall be given the honour and glory which are due to it. The highest of all missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God, verse 18), but rather zeal—burning and passionate zeal—for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Some evangelism, to be sure, is no better than a thinly disguised form of imperialism, whenever our real ambition is for the honour of our nation, church, organization, or ourselves. Only one imperialism is Christian, however, and that is concern for His Imperial Majesty Jesus Christ, and for the glory of his empire or kingdom. The earliest Christians, John tells us, went out 'for the sake of the Name'.<sup>[34]</sup> He does not even specify to which name he is referring. But we know. And Paul tells us. It is the incomparable name of Jesus. Before this supreme goal of the Christian mission, all unworthy motives wither and die.

To sum up, here are six fundamental truths about the gospel. Its origin is God the Father and its substance Jesus Christ his Son. Its attestation is Old Testament Scripture and its scope all the nations. Our immediate purpose in proclaiming it is to bring people to the obedience of faith, but our ultimate goal is the greater glory of the name of Jesus Christ. Or, to simplify these truths by the use of six prepositions, we can say that the good news is the gospel of God, *about* Christ, *according* to Scripture, *for* the nations, *unto* the obedience of faith, and *for the sake of* the Name.

## 2. Paul and the Romans (1:7–13)

Having described himself (both his apostleship and his gospel), Paul now addresses himself to his readers: *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ* (7). It is hard for us to imagine the sensations which the mere mention of the word 'Rome' would arouse in first-century people who lived far away in one of the provinces. For 'she was the eternal city which had given them peace,' wrote Bishop Stephen Neill, 'the fount of law, the centre of civilisation, the Mecca of poets and orators and artists', while being at the same time 'a home of every kind of idolatrous worship'.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet God had his people there, whom the apostle describes in three ways.

First, they are *loved by God*, his own dear children. Secondly, they are *called to be saints*, as also they are 'called to belong to Jesus Christ' (6). 'The saints' or 'the holy people' was a regular Old Testament designation of Israel. Now, however, the Gentile Christians in Rome were also 'saints'. For all Christians without exception are called by God to belong to Christ and to his holy people.

Thirdly, the Roman Christians are the recipients of God's *grace and peace*. The Aaronic blessing in the Old Testament was a prayer that Yahweh would both 'be gracious' to his people and give them 'peace'.<sup>[2]</sup> As used by Paul, one could almost claim that these words epitomize two of his major purposes in writing this letter, 'grace' emphasizing the freeness of God's justification of sinners, and 'peace' the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ. Although he does not use the word 'church' (perhaps because the Roman Christians met in several house groups), he nevertheless sends his greetings to them *all* (7) and gives thanks for them *all* (8), irrespective of their ethnic origin. Since 'beloved', 'called' and 'saints' were all Old Testament epithets for Israel, it seems probable that Paul deliberately uses them here to indicate that all believers in Christ, Gentiles as well as Jews, now belong to the covenant people of God.<sup>[3]</sup>

After this introduction the apostle tells his Roman readers frankly of his feelings towards them. He makes four points.

### 1. He thanks God for them all

*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world* (8). Allowing for a degree of legitimate hyperbole, it was still true that wherever the church had spread, the news that there were Christians in the capital had spread also. And although Paul had not been responsible for bringing the gospel to them, this did not inhibit him from giving thanks that Rome had been evangelized.

### 2. He prays for them

*God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you* (9) *in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you* (10). In Paul's apostolic ministry, preaching and praying go together. He assures them that, even though most of them are unknown to him personally, he yet intercedes for them *constantly* (9) and *at all times* (10a). This is no pious platitude. He is telling the truth, and he calls on God to witness his statement. In particular, he prays that *now at last by God's will*, that is, if it is his will, *the way may be opened* for him to come to them (10b). It is a humble, tentative petition. He presumes neither to impose his will on God, nor to claim to know what God's will may be. Instead, he submits his will to God's. When we reach chapter 15, we will consider how his prayer was answered.

### 3. He longs to see them and he tells them why

His first reason is this: *so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift (charisma) to make you strong* (11). At first sight it seems natural to interpret such a gift as one of those *charismata* which Paul has listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and will list later in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. There seems to be a fatal objection to this, however; namely that in those other passages the gifts are bestowed by the sovereign decision of God,<sup>4</sup> Christ<sup>5</sup> or the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> So the apostle could hardly claim to be able to 'impart' a *charisma* himself. He appears therefore to be using the word in a more general sense. Perhaps he is referring to his own teaching or exhortation, which he hopes to give them when he arrives, although there is 'an intentional indefiniteness'<sup>7</sup> about his statement, perhaps because at this stage he does not know what their main spiritual needs will be.

No sooner has he dictated these words than he seems to sense their inappropriate one-sidedness, as if he has everything to give and nothing to receive. So he immediately explains (even corrects) himself: *that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith* (12). He knows about the reciprocal blessings of Christian fellowship and, although he is an apostle, he is not too proud to acknowledge his need of it. Happy is the modern missionary who goes to another country and culture in the same spirit of receptivity, anxious to receive as well as give, to learn as well as teach, to be encouraged as well as to encourage! And happy is the congregation who have a pastor of the same humble mind!

### 4. He has often planned to visit them

*I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) ...* (13a). Exactly what has foiled him he does not say. Perhaps the most likely explanation is the one he will mention towards the end of his letter, namely that his evangelistic work in and around Greece had not yet been completed (15:22f.). Why had he tried to visit them? He now gives a third reason: *in order that I might have (RSV 'reap') a harvest among you*. 'Harvest' is literally 'fruit', and John Murray rightly comments: 'The idea expressed is that of gathering fruit, not that of bearing it.'<sup>8</sup> In other words, he hopes to win some converts in Rome, *just as ... among the other Gentiles* (13). It would surely be appropriate that the apostle to the Gentiles should engage in evangelistic reaping in the capital city of the Gentile world.

## 3. Paul and evangelism (1:14–17)

The apostle now makes three strong personal statements about his anxiety to preach the gospel in Rome:

verse 14 'I am bound ...' (RSV 'under obligation')

verse 15 'I am ... eager ...'

verse 16 'I am not ashamed ...'

The reason these affirmations are so striking is that they are in direct antithesis to the attitude of many in the contemporary church. People nowadays tend to regard evangelism as an optional extra and consider (if they engage in it) that they are conferring a favour on God; Paul spoke of it as an obligation. The modern mood is one of reluctance; Paul's was one of eagerness or enthusiasm. Many of us today would have to confess, if we are honest, that we *are* ashamed of the gospel; Paul declared that he was not.

Mind you, Paul had just as many reasons to feel reluctant or embarrassed as we do. Rome was the symbol of imperial pride and power. People spoke of it with awe. Everybody hoped to visit Rome at least once in their lifetime, in order to look and stare and wonder. But who was this fellow Paul who wanted to visit the capital city not as a tourist but as an evangelist, and who believed he had something to say which Rome needed to listen to? What folly and presumption was this? According to tradition, Paul was an ugly little guy with beetle brows, bandy legs, a bald pate, a hooked nose, bad eyesight and no great rhetorical gifts.<sup>1</sup> So what could he hope to accomplish against the proud might of imperial Rome? Would he not be wiser to stay away? Or, if he must visit Rome, would it not be prudent for him to keep his big mouth shut, lest he be laughed out of court and hustled out of town?

Evidently Paul did not think so. On the contrary, 'I am under obligation', he wrote; 'I am ... eager ... I am not ashamed.' What, then, were the origins of his evangelistic enthusiasm? They were two.

### 1. The gospel is a debt to the world (14–15)

The NIV *I am bound* and the RSV 'I am under obligation' should properly be translated 'I am [a] debtor' (AV). It is perhaps puzzlement over how and why the gospel could be a debt which has led translators to write more generally of 'obligation'. There are, in fact, two possible ways of getting into debt. The first is to borrow money *from* someone; the second is to be given money *for* someone by a third party. For example, if I were to borrow £1,000 from you, I would be in your debt until I paid it back. Equally, if a friend of yours were to hand me £1,000 to give to you, I would be in your debt until I handed it over. In the former case I would have got myself into debt by borrowing; in the latter it is your friend who has put me in your debt by entrusting me with £1,000 for you.

It is in this second sense that Paul is in debt. He has not borrowed anything from the Romans which he must repay. But Jesus Christ has entrusted him with the gospel for them. Several times in his letters he writes of having been 'put in trust with the gospel'.<sup>2</sup> It is true that this metaphor is one of stewardship (or trusteeship) rather than indebtedness, but the

underlying thought is the same. It is Jesus Christ who has made Paul a debtor by committing the gospel to his trust. He was in debt to the Romans. As apostle to the Gentiles he was particularly in debt to the Gentile world, *both to Greeks and non-Greeks* (literally ‘barbarians’), *both to the wise and the foolish* (14). It is not certain how we are meant to understand this classification. Both couplets may denote the same contrasting groups, or the first may allude to differences of nationality, culture and language, the second of intelligence and education. Either way, these expressions together cover the whole of Gentile humanity. It was because of his sense of debt to them that he could write: *That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome* (15).

Similarly, we are debtors to the world, even though we are not apostles. If the gospel has come to us (which it has), we have no liberty to keep it to ourselves. Nobody may claim a monopoly of the gospel. Good news is for sharing. We are under obligation to make it known to others.

Such was Paul’s first incentive. He was eager because he was in debt. It is universally regarded as a dishonourable thing to leave a debt unpaid. We should be as eager to discharge our debt as Paul was to discharge his.

## 2. The gospel is God’s power for salvation (16)

Paul now gives a second reason for being eager to preach the gospel, and not ashamed of it: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile* (16).

Some commentators are so offended by the thought that Paul could feel ashamed of the gospel that they pronounce his statement a case of litotes, that is, an understatement made for rhetorical effect, especially the use of a negative in place of a positive (as when someone says, ‘I am not amused’, meaning ‘I am upset and angry’). So Moffatt renders the phrase, ‘I am proud of the gospel.’ But surely this attempt to tone down Paul’s statement, though grammatically permissible, is psychologically misguided. Jesus himself warned his disciples against being ashamed of him, which shows that he anticipated they might be.<sup>3</sup> and Paul gave Timothy a similar admonition.<sup>4</sup> I once heard James Stewart of Edinburgh, in a sermon on this text, make the perceptive comment that ‘there’s no sense in declaring that you’re not ashamed of something unless you’ve been tempted to feel ashamed of it’. And without doubt Paul knew this temptation. He told the Corinthians that he came to them ‘in weakness and fear, and with much trembling’.<sup>5</sup> He knew that the message of the cross was ‘foolishness’ to some and ‘a stumbling-block’ to others,<sup>6</sup> because it undermines self-righteousness and challenges self-indulgence. So whenever the gospel is faithfully preached, it arouses opposition, often contempt, and sometimes ridicule.

How then did Paul (and how shall we) overcome the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel? He tells us. It is by remembering that the very same message, which some people despise for its weakness, is in fact *the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*. How do we know this? In the long run, only because we have experienced its saving power in our own lives. Has God reconciled us to himself through Christ, forgiven our sins, made us his children, put his Spirit within us, begun to transform us, and introduced us into his new community? Then how can we possibly be ashamed of the gospel?

Moreover, the gospel is God’s saving power for *everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile*. Saving faith, which is the necessary response to the gospel, is the great leveller. For everyone who is saved is saved in exactly the same way, by faith.<sup>7</sup> That goes for Jews and Gentiles equally. There is no distinction between them in respect of salvation.<sup>8</sup> The priority of the Jews (‘first for the Jew’) is both theological, because God chose them and made his covenant with them, and therefore historical (‘We had to speak the word of God to you first’).<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on the apostle’s three personal affirmations in verses 14–16, we have seen that his eagerness to evangelize in Rome arose from his recognition that the gospel is an unpaid debt to the world and the saving power of God. The first gave him a sense of obligation (he had been put in trust with the good news), and the second a sense of conviction (if it had saved him, it could save others). Still today the gospel is both a debt to discharge and a power to experience. Only when we have grasped and felt these truths shall we be able to say with Paul, ‘I am not ashamed ... I am under obligation ... So I am eager to share the gospel with the world.’

## 3. The gospel reveals God’s righteousness (17)

*For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’* (17).

We note the logic of Paul’s statement in verses 16–17: ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel, *because it is the power of God for ... salvation ... For (gar, because) in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed...*’ That is, the reason the gospel is God’s saving power is that in it God’s righteousness is revealed. Moreover, this righteousness is ‘from faith to faith’ (AV), in fulfilment of Habakkuk 2:4: ‘the righteous will live by his faith’. Many commentators have called verses 16–17 the ‘text’ of which the rest of Romans is the exposition. They are certainly crucial to our understanding. But three basic questions confront us. First, what is ‘the righteousness of God’? Secondly, what is the meaning of ‘from faith to faith’ (AV) or ‘through faith for faith’ (RSV)? Thirdly, how should we interpret the Habakkuk quotation and Paul’s use of it?

### a. The righteousness of God

The meaning of the expression *dikaïosynē theou* (‘righteousness of—or from—God’) has been discussed throughout

church history and has in consequence attracted an enormous, even unmanageable, literature. It is not easy to summarize, let alone to systematize, the debate.

First, some emphasize that ‘the righteousness of God’ is a *divine attribute* or quality. ‘Righteousness’ describes his character, together with his actions which are in keeping with his character. Since he is ‘the Judge of all the earth’, it stands to reason that he will himself always ‘do right’.<sup>[10]</sup> For he loves righteousness and hates wickedness, and righteousness is the sceptre of his kingdom.<sup>[11]</sup>

In Romans God’s personal righteousness is supremely seen in the cross of Christ. When God ‘presented him as a sacrifice of atonement’, he did it ‘to demonstrate his justice’ (*dikaïosynē*, 3:25, repeated in 3:26), and in order that he might be both himself ‘just’ and ‘the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus’ (3:26b). Throughout Romans Paul is at pains to defend the righteous character and behaviour of God. For he is convinced that whatever God does—in salvation (3:25) or in judgment (2:5)—is absolutely consistent with his righteousness. This is William Campbell’s emphasis, namely that ‘the righteousness of God’ is ‘first and foremost a righteousness that demonstrates God’s faithfulness to his own righteous nature’.<sup>[12]</sup> his integrity, his self-consistency. This attribute of God cannot be, however, either the only or even the main truth which Paul declares to be revealed in the gospel (1:17), since it was already fully revealed in the law.

Others stress, secondly, that ‘the righteousness of God’ is a *divine activity*, namely his saving intervention on behalf of his people. Indeed, his ‘salvation’ and his ‘righteousness’ are frequently coupled in the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, especially in the Psalms and in Isaiah 40–66. For example, ‘the LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.’<sup>[13]</sup> Similarly, God declares: ‘I am bringing my righteousness near ... and my salvation will not be delayed.’<sup>[14]</sup> and describes himself as ‘a righteous God and a Saviour’.<sup>[15]</sup> It would perhaps be an exaggeration to claim in the light of these texts that God’s righteousness and God’s salvation are synonyms. It is rather that his righteousness denotes his loyalty to his covenant promises, in the light of which he may be implored—and expected—to come to the salvation of his people. For example, ‘Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God.’<sup>[16]</sup> As John Ziesler has put it, ‘salvation is the *form* that God’s righteousness ... takes’.<sup>[17]</sup> Ernst Käsemann writes of God’s righteousness in terms of power, God’s saving power, in loyalty to his covenant, overthrowing the forces of evil and vindicating his people.<sup>[18]</sup> N. T. Wright’s understanding is similar. The righteousness of God, he writes, is ‘essentially the covenant faithfulness, the covenant justice, of the God who made promises to Abraham, promises of a worldwide family characterized by faith, in and through whom the evil of the world would be undone’.<sup>[19]</sup>

Thirdly, ‘the righteousness of God’ revealed in the gospel is a *divine achievement*. The genitive is now no longer subjective (as in reference to God’s character and activity), but objective (‘a righteousness from God’, as NIV renders the phrase in both 1:17 and 3:21). Indeed in Philippians 3:9 the simple genitive (‘the righteousness of God’) is replaced by a prepositional phrase (‘the righteousness ... *from* God, *ek theou*). It is a righteous status which God requires if we are ever to stand before him, which he achieves through the atoning sacrifice of the cross, which he reveals in the gospel, and which he bestows freely on all who trust in Jesus Christ.

There can be little doubt that Paul uses the expression ‘the righteousness of God’ in this third way. He contrasts it with our own righteousness,<sup>[20]</sup> which we are tempted to establish instead of submitting to God’s righteousness (10:3). God’s righteousness is a gift (5:17) which is offered to faith (3:22) and which we can have or enjoy.<sup>[21]</sup> Charles Cranfield, who opts for this interpretation, paraphrases 1:17 in this way: ‘For in it (*i.e.* in the gospel as it is being preached) a righteous status which is God’s gift is being revealed (and so offered to men)—a righteous status which is altogether by faith.’<sup>[22]</sup> Further, in 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul has written that in Christ we actually ‘become the righteousness of God’; in Romans 4 he will write about righteousness being ‘credited’ (‘reckoned’ or ‘imputed’) to us, as it was to Abraham (verses 3, 24); and in 1 Corinthians 1:30 it is Christ himself ‘who has become for us ... our righteousness’.

Thus ‘the righteousness of God’ can be thought of as a divine attribute (our God is a righteous God), or activity (he comes to our rescue), or achievement (he bestows on us a righteous status). All three are true and have been held by different scholars, sometimes in relation to each other. For myself, I have never been able to see why we have to choose, and why all three should not be combined. Even Professor Fitzmyer, who uses the strange expression ‘the uprightness of God’, and affirms that it is ‘descriptive of God’s upright being and of his upright activity’,<sup>[23]</sup> goes on to concede that it also expresses ‘the status of uprightness communicated to human beings by God’s gracious gift’.<sup>[24]</sup> In other words, it is at one and the same time a quality, an activity and a gift.

It seems legitimate to affirm, therefore, that ‘the righteousness of God’ is God’s righteous initiative in putting sinners right with himself, by bestowing on them a righteousness which is not their own but his. ‘The righteousness of God’ is God’s just justification of the unjust, his righteous way of pronouncing the unrighteous righteous, in which he both demonstrates his righteousness and gives righteousness to us. He has done it through Christ, the righteous one, who died for the unrighteous, as Paul will explain later. And he does it by faith when we put our trust in him, and cry to him for mercy.

#### **b. ‘From faith to faith’**

The righteousness of God, which is revealed in the gospel and offered to us, is (literally) ‘out of faith into faith’ or ‘from faith to faith’ (AV). Many explanations of this phrase have been proposed, some more ingenious than others. I mention what seem to me to be the four most plausible. The first relates to faith’s *origin*, as Bengel puts it: ‘from the faith of God, who makes the offer, to the faith of men who receive it’.<sup>[25]</sup> More simply, it is ‘from God’s faith (better, faithfulness) to

our faith'. God's faithfulness always comes first, and ours is never other than a response. This was Karl Barth's understanding.<sup>[26]</sup> Secondly, the *spread* of faith by evangelism may be in Paul's mind: 'from one believer to another'. Thirdly, he may be alluding to faith's *growth*, 'from one degree of faith to another' (*cf.* 2 Cor. 3:18, RSV). Fourthly, it may be faith's *primacy* which is being stressed. In this case the expression is purely rhetorical, and has been rendered, for example, *by faith from first to last* (NIV) or 'by faith through and through'.<sup>[27]</sup>

### c. *The Habakkuk quotation*

The apostle now confirms his emphasis on faith from Scripture and quotes Habakkuk 2:4: *The righteous will live by faith*. The prophet had complained that God intended to raise up the ruthless Babylonians to punish Israel. How could he use the wicked to judge the wicked? Habakkuk was told that whereas the proud Babylonians would fall, the righteous Israelite would live by his faith, that is, in the context, by his humble, steadfast trust in God.

Many scholars, however, like RSV, translate Paul's quotation of Habakkuk differently: 'he who through faith is righteous shall live'. There are strong arguments in favour of this epigram. First, Paul has already used this text, in Galatians<sup>[28]</sup> written some years earlier, as biblical support for justification by faith, not law. So this seems to be how he understands it. Secondly, the context almost demands this rendering, being an endorsement from Scripture of 'from faith to faith'. Paul's concern here is not how righteous people live, but how sinful people become righteous. Thirdly, this translation fits the structure of the letter. Thus Anders Nygren points out that in Romans 1–4 'faith' occurs at least twenty-five times and 'life' only twice, whereas in Romans 5–8 'life' occurs twenty-five times and 'faith' only twice. These statistics establish, he concludes, 'that the theme for chapters 1–4 is "he who through faith is righteous" and for chapters 5–8 "he shall live"'.<sup>[29]</sup>

But is it legitimate to translate the Habakkuk text in this way, and so to make faith the way to righteousness instead of the way to life? I think so. We note that it characterizes God's people in terms of righteousness, faith and life. Whichever way the sentence is understood, both renderings affirm that 'the righteous shall live' and that faith is essential. The only question is whether the righteous by faith will live, or the righteous will live by faith. Are not both true? Righteousness and life are both by faith. Those who are righteous by faith also live by faith. Having begun in faith, they continue in the same path. This also fits in with the expression 'from faith to faith', which stresses that the Christian life is by faith from beginning to end. So I think F. F. Bruce was correct to write: 'The terms of Habakkuk's oracle are sufficiently general to make room for Paul's application of them—an application which, far from doing violence to the prophet's intention, expresses the abiding validity of his message.'<sup>[30]</sup>