

# Romans 1:1–7



**P**AUL, A SERVANT of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—<sup>2</sup>the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures <sup>3</sup>regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. <sup>6</sup>And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>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.



ANCIENT LETTERS TYPICALLY began with a simple identification of the sender, the recipients, and a greeting. New Testament letters follow this pattern, but often elaborate by adding distinctly

Christian nuances. No New Testament letter shows as much elaboration as Romans. Perhaps because he is writing to a church he has never visited before, Paul spends six verses identifying himself before he mentions the recipients (v. 7a) and extends them a greeting (v. 7b).

## Paul (1:1)

PAUL INTRODUCES HIMSELF to the Roman Christians by identifying his master, his office, and his purpose. (1) He is a "servant of Christ Jesus." While clearly revealing Paul's sense of subservience to his Lord (the word "servant" [*doulos*] can also be translated "slave"), this title also suggests his status. For the Old Testament "servant of the Lord" was applied especially to outstanding figures in Israel's history, such as Moses (e.g., Josh. 14:7) and David (e.g., Ps. 18:1).

(2) Paul also points in verse 1 to his office and to its authority: He is "called to be an apostle," one of those whom Jesus himself had appointed to represent him and to provide the foundation for his church (see Eph. 2:20).

(3) The most important point Paul wants to make in this opening verse has to do with his purpose: “set apart for the gospel of God.” God may have set apart Paul for the gospel ministry as early as the womb—just as he had done for the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5). But the “setting apart” probably refers to the time when God called him on the Damascus Road to come into relationship with Christ and to proclaim him to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 9:1–19, esp. vv. 15–16; note the use of this same verb in 13:2). The “gospel” is the central, unifying motif of Romans, and Paul signals its importance by referring to it three other times in the introduction to the letter (vv. 9, 15, 16). God has appointed Paul to the special task of proclaiming and explaining the good news of God’s intervention in Jesus Christ.

### Paul and the Gospel (1:2–4)

PAUL NOW ELABORATES his brief introduction, describing the “gospel” in verses 2–4 and his apostolic calling in verses 5–6. The first point Paul makes about the gospel (v. 2) reflects another key theme of Romans. Throughout the letter he is at pains to demonstrate that the good news about Jesus Christ is rooted firmly in the soil of the Old Testament. The “prophets” to which he refers are not just the famous writing prophets, whose books are now found in the Old Testament, but Old Testament authors generally. As Luther put it, in Paul’s perspective, “Scripture is completely prophetic.” Verses 3–4 describe the content of the gospel: Jesus Christ himself. In two parallel statements, Paul succinctly summarizes the mission of Christ:

Regarding his Son,

verse 3

who as to his human nature  
was a descendant of David

verse 4

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

The current NIV translation suggests that Paul is contrasting the two “natures” of Christ. He is both fully human, a descendant of David, and fully divine, shown by his resurrection to be the Son of God. But this is probably incorrect. The verb translated “declared” in verse 4 (from *horizo*) is better translated “appointed.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, this verse does not mean that the resurrection made clear what Jesus already was; rather, it qualified him to attain an entirely new status. However, this does not mean that Jesus *became* Son of God at the

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1. See Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 11:29; 17:26, 31; Heb. 4:7.

time of his resurrection; he always was God's Son. But he did become "Son-of-God-in-power."<sup>2</sup> In his earthly life, Jesus was truly the Messiah, descendant of David, and Paul does not minimize the importance of this status. But Jesus' resurrection, concluding and validating the messianic work of redemption, gave him new power to dispense salvation to all those who would believe in him (see esp. v. 16).

To put it another way, verses 3–4 do not depict two natures of Christ, but two stages in his existence. This is confirmed by one more key contrast in the verses. The word translated in the NIV "human nature" is *sarx* (lit., flesh). "Spirit of holiness" is properly capitalized in the NIV (though see NIV note) to indicate a reference to the Holy Spirit. The flesh/Spirit contrast in Paul is fundamental to his theology and will appear constantly in Romans. What is key to this text is that the contrast is usually a salvation-historical one in Paul. "Flesh" represents the old era that is passing away; "Spirit" denotes the new era inaugurated by Christ's work of redemption and marked by a new, powerful work of God's Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The relatively few specific references to Christology in the body of Romans do not mean that the person of Christ is not important for the gospel. Verses 3–4, easily overlooked in the prescript of the letter, introduce Christ as the content of the gospel. By quoting a tradition about Jesus that was probably already circulating in the early church (see Bridging Contexts section), Paul both lays the foundation for the gospel he will elaborate in the letter and establishes common ground with the Roman Christians.

### Paul's Apostolic Ministry (1:5–6)

IN VERSES 5–6, Paul elaborates briefly on his apostolic status. He has received this "grace of being an apostle" (taking "grace" and "apostleship" closely together) for two purposes. (1) One task is to "call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." From the time of his conversion (see Acts 9:15), the Lord made clear that Paul's primary mission was to bring Gentiles to faith in Jesus. But rather than referring simply to "faith," Paul uses an expanded phrase, which literally translates "the obedience of faith." The NIV, following many commentators, takes "faith" (*pistis*) as the *basis* for the obedience: commitment to Christ in faith leads to obedience in life.<sup>4</sup>

2. Most recent commentators take *en dynamei* (lit., "in power") with "Son of God" rather than with the participle *horisthentos*, "declared" (see Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 48).

3. For more on the flesh/Spirit contrast in Paul, see esp. the Bridging Contexts section on 8:1–13.

4. The word *pisteos* (the genitive of *pistis*) is then a genitive of source. See, e.g., G. N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1–4* (JSNTSup 39; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 25–30.

But *pistis* can also *identify* the obedience that Paul has in mind: “the obedience that is faith.” Paul sometimes describes faith in terms of obedience, as when he speaks of people “obeying” the gospel (Rom. 10:16 NRSV).<sup>5</sup>

Neither of these alternatives does justice to the interplay between faith and obedience in Paul. The former can imply that faith is the first stage of Christian experience, to be followed by obedience. But faith is central to all stages of the Christian life. The latter improperly collapses obedience into faith, whereas in Paul they are usually distinct ideas. The best alternative, then, is to use the straightforward, though ambiguous, translation “obedience of faith,” and to interpret the words in the phrase as mutually interpreting: faith, if genuine, always has obedience as its outcome; obedience, if it is to please God, must always be accompanied by faith (for more on this, see Contemporary Significance section).

Paul probably uses this unusual formulation as a deliberate counter to the Jewish “works of the law.” What marks God’s people is no longer deeds done in obedience to the law, but an obedience that stems from, accompanies, and displays faith. Significantly, Paul ends this letter on the same note, referring in the doxology again to “the obedience of faith” (16:26; NIV paraphrases it as “believe and obey”). If one purpose of Paul’s apostolic ministry is horizontal, the second and ultimate purpose is vertical: Paul ministers “for his name’s sake.” Bringing glory to God must always be the preeminent purpose of all ministry.

(2) The Christians in Rome, Paul asserts in verse 6, are included among those Gentiles. One of Paul’s concerns in this long prescript is to establish his right to address a group of Christians he has never met before. Thus he makes it clear that the Romans belong to the sphere of ministry God has assigned him. God gave Paul the task of calling “people from among all the Gentiles” to the obedience of faith (v. 5). This interpretation rests on an alternative translation to that found in the NIV. The NIV suggests that “also” should be linked with the word “called”: Like Paul (cf. v. 1), the Christians in Rome have also been called. But the emphasis of verse 5 makes it more likely that Paul is claiming that the Romans are “also” among those Gentiles to whom Paul has been sent to proclaim the message of “the obedience of faith.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Roman Christians (1:7)

PAUL FINALLY GETS around to identifying the recipients of the letter. They are all the Christians in Rome, “loved by God and called to be saints.” Both

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5. The word *pisteos* is then an epexegetic genitive. See, e.g., Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 14–15.

6. See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 53.

descriptions reflect Old Testament language about Israel. Paul, as an important part of his agenda in this letter, is implying that the Roman Christians, Gentiles though most of them may be, have inherited the privileges and promises granted to the Old Testament people of God. "Saints" translates a Greek word (*hagioi*) that means "holy ones." The Roman Christians, like the Israelites of old, are "holy" because God has set them apart to be his own people. The prescript concludes with the typical wish for grace and peace. "Grace" (*charis*) comes from a word (*chairein*) that often appears in Greek letters as a greeting (cf., e.g., James 1:1). "Peace," by contrast, reflects the Semitic world, for behind it lies *shalom*, the Old Testament word for the well-being of the righteous.



*Bridging  
Contexts*

IF WE ARE to appreciate Paul's teaching in these first seven verses—and, indeed, throughout this letter—we must have a sense of what the language Paul uses may have meant to the first readers of this letter. Words always have a context, and only by having some sense of that context can we truly appreciate their real significance. Two contexts that we may not be aware of will help us understand more fully Paul's words in these first seven verses.

**Early Christian teaching.** Paul reflects early Christian teaching about Jesus and his significance. This is especially true in verses 3–4, where most interpreters think Paul is quoting from a hymn or creed about Jesus that circulated widely among the first Christians. As we noted above, these verses can be arranged in two "stanzas" with roughly parallel lines. The parallelism is more striking in Greek than in the English—the kind of parallelism we might expect in a hymn. Moreover, the verses contain some language, such as "Spirit of holiness," that Paul uses nowhere else, and some ideas, such as the Davidic descent of Jesus, that do not feature prominently in his teaching. When we add to these considerations a natural desire on Paul's part to establish common ground with the Roman Christians, whom he has never met, the conclusion he is quoting from another source in these verses seems well established.

To be sure, we must be cautious about this conclusion and any inferences we draw from it. Some interpreters do not think that we have here a quotation at all. Paul may have used some traditional words and ideas in formulating his own semi-poetic Christological statement. Even if we think a quotation does exist, we should recognize that we do not have enough information to justify some of the exegetical conclusions scholars have reached. Some of them, for instance, distinguish between the original form of the

quotation and additions or modifications Paul made to it. Paul's "redaction," they suggest, betrays his real purpose in using the quotation and directs our attention to the parts of the quotation that he agrees with and those he may want to reject. Instead, we must interpret the words in the context in which they now appear.<sup>7</sup>

Still, we think it likely that Paul does quote from a hymn or creed, and the procedure is both rhetorically effective and theologically unobjectionable. A good communicator will always try to build a bridge to his or her audience by using words and ideas they are familiar with. Just as the preacher quotes the stanza of a popular hymn to bring a point home, so Paul may well want to cite lines from a well-known early Christian hymn to communicate the truth of Christ to the Roman Christians. But a quotation will often do far more than merely illustrate a point; it will bring it home to an audience in the way a simple prose statement cannot. Because this point is so important in appreciating Romans, we will spend a little time on it.

Let me begin with an example. When my sons were growing up, I regularly played basketball with them on the driveway in front of our house. Now that they are grown, I foolishly try to continue the tradition. Not long ago, I was playing some one-on-one with my third son, 6'6" 240 lb. Lukas, who plays intercollegiate basketball. I taunted him, "Be careful, Luke, I'm going to take the ball to the basket on you." His response: "Go ahead, Dad—make my day." His words, of course, reflect the famous Clint Eastwood line from the *Dirty Harry* movies. Luke could simply have said to me, "If you try that, Dad, I am going to reject your shot." But by using this particular line, he brought to the driveway a sense of the menace and steely determination that was intrinsic to the original cinematic context.

In other words, quotations and allusions generally have the power to conjure up for the reader something of the context from which the words were taken. Putting our finger on the exact nuance is often difficult, because much of the significance may be emotional. (I know Luke's words stirred emotions in me, most of them making me think twice about taking the ball to the basket.) We must recognize that Paul in Romans frequently seeks, through quotation and allusion, to draw his readers into his argument in a way that his own words could never have done.

**The Old Testament.** Because we have no independent knowledge of the Christian tradition Paul may be citing in verses 3–4, we have no way of determining the precise effect the quotation may have had. But we do have access to another tradition that is far more important for Paul's purposes in Romans: the Old Testament. Because so much of Romans is about the rela-

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7. See, e.g., Schreiner, *Romans*, 40.