

The Setting of Romans in the Ministry of Paul

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Introduction

Perhaps the most discussed issue in Romans scholarship is whether it should be understood as an occasional epistle or as a theological treatise.¹ Did Paul design his epistle as an introduction to his primary doctrinal convictions for this church that he had never visited, or is his letter treating specific issues within the congregation that he knew needed to be addressed? One probably should not draw the lines too sharply. Much of the epistle deals with theological concerns, although it is scarcely a “systematic theology.” One must turn to other of Paul’s epistles for more thorough treatment of some important doctrines such as Christology and ecclesiology. On the other hand, some portions of the epistle focus on matters of a more occasional nature, especially the final three chapters. By design this article concerns primarily issues of the occasion for the letter in an attempt to place it within the total context of Paul’s ministry. In a sense it could be entitled “a tale of three cities,” as the epistle involves three distinct locales: Corinth, from which Paul was writing; Jerusalem, to which Paul was preparing to travel soon; and Rome, which was Paul’s ultimate destination.

Place and Time of Writing

All the evidence indicates that Paul wrote the Roman epistle from Corinth toward the end of his third missionary journey. The date would have been the winter of A.D. 56-57. Paul had established

the work in Corinth at the end of his second missionary journey, at that time spending eighteen or more months there (Acts 18:1-18). The relationship between Paul and Corinth seems to have deteriorated during the course of his third mission, which was mainly spent in Ephesus. He seems to have made a brief second visit to Corinth at this time, probably going by sea to Corinth from Ephesus and back. Acts does not mention this visit, but Paul implied its existence in his second letter to Corinth, where he spoke of a “painful” visit with them (2 Cor 2:1) and of his plans to visit them a “third time” (2 Cor 13:1). The third visit to Corinth would be this final stay when he wrote Romans. That it took place at all is indicative that Paul and the church had overcome their differences and the church had become reconciled to Paul’s leadership. The first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians seem to indicate that this reconciliation had taken place (especially 7:2-16). This final visit is mentioned briefly in Acts 20:1-3, where Paul referred to Corinth as “Greece” (*Hellas*). The fact that it lasted three months probably indicates the winter months. Paul was planning to travel to Palestine with a collection for the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem and was waiting for the favorable sailing conditions the spring would bring.

The Collection²

Acts 20:1-4 does not mention Paul’s collection for Jerusalem, but it is implicit in the reference to the various leaders of

Paul's Gentile churches who are mentioned in verses 3 and 4. They were the official church representatives who had been chosen to accompany Paul to Palestine (in Roman "Syria") with the offering for Jerusalem. Though Acts does not explicitly refer to this collection, Paul did so, mentioning it in every letter written during the course of his third mission.

The collection seems to have been a pet project of Paul. He may well have conceived it as a result of the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15), where the Jerusalem church formally recognized the legitimacy of Paul's "Torah-free" Gentile mission. Galatians 2:10, which probably refers to that conference, says that the leaders of the mission to the Jews (James, Peter, and John) asked Paul at that time "to remember the poor." Paul added that he was eager to do so. The term "poor" was often used to refer to the Jewish Christians, and this is likely the meaning here. It became the seed for Paul's collection for the Jewish Christians. Paul's "circumcision-free" Gentile mission had caused tension with the more conservative elements among the Jewish Christians and had prompted the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:1-5). Paul probably saw the request to "remember the poor" as an opportunity to express in a tangible manner the unity of his Gentile converts with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. As he put it himself, it was a means by which through their material sharing they could in some way repay the Jewish Christians for sharing their own spiritual blessings (Rom 15:27).

Paul mentioned the collection in both Corinthian letters. At the conclusion of 1 Corinthians, he urged the Corinthians to contribute to the collection.³ He mentioned the official representatives of the

church who would accompany the collection to Jerusalem but at that time was not sure whether he would accompany them (1 Cor 16:1-4). In 2 Corinthians, written only months later, Paul devoted two whole chapters to the collection (2 Cor 8-9). Evidently the Corinthians had not taken the collection to heart, and Paul had to persuade them to carry through on their pledge to support the venture.⁴ He sought to prompt them by informing them of the generosity of other churches (2 Cor 8:1-5) and then by reminding them how he had boasted to these same churches of how eager Corinth had been to participate in the collection (2 Cor 9:3). He had possibly been accused of having selfish motives in making the collection, so he took pains to insure the integrity of the offering by having it administered by official representatives appointed by the churches (8:16-24). As we have seen, Paul wrote Romans during his final three-month stay in Corinth at the end of his third mission. This visit was largely preoccupied with the final arrangements for the collection, and the collection played a major role in Paul's plans to visit Rome.

The Occasion for the Letter (Rom 15:14-33)

Whatever position one takes in the "Romans debate" one unmistakable "occasional" note is found in Rom 15:14-33, where Paul expressed his plans to visit the Roman Christians and his reason for temporarily delaying that venture. The passage falls naturally into two parts: vv. 14-24 treat Paul's view of his apostolic calling and his desire to minister to the Roman Christians, while vv. 25-33 relate his reason for delaying his coming to Rome.

Paul's Plans (15:14-24)

As Paul approached the subject of his plans to come to Rome, he was somewhat diplomatic and commended the Romans for their “goodness” and “knowledge” and ability to “instruct” one another. He did not want to leave any impression that his motive in coming was to “set them straight.” He had already expressed his desire to come to Rome at the beginning of the letter (Rom 1:9-15). There he spoke of wanting to share a “spiritual gift” (*charisma*) with the Romans (1:11). Realizing how that could be construed as presumption, Paul quickly adjusted his remark by stating that what he sought was *mutual* encouragement—he toward the Romans and they toward him (1:12). Still, Paul desired to carry on his ministry in Rome. He was the apostle to the Gentiles (*ethnē*, 1:5), and as such wished to harvest some fruit among the Gentiles in Rome, just as he had elsewhere (1:13).

As Paul continued his conclusion he sought to justify the “boldness” with which he had set forth his convictions in the Roman letter. He was an apostle, called to minister to the Gentiles, offering them up like a priest making an offering to God, sanctified by the Spirit (15:15-16). He felt justified in boasting of his work accomplished among the Gentiles, for it was not his own work but that of Christ working through him, a work that brought the Gentiles to obedience in Christ, not just in word but in deed as well (15:17-18). The divine origin of his ministry had been verified by the accompaniment of miraculous activity through the presence of the Spirit (15:19a). Indeed, to this point, Paul’s ministry had covered a large portion of the east, all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:19b). This was roughly the area covered by Paul’s three

missionary journeys in Acts. In fact, it was somewhat larger than the area mentioned in Acts, since Illyricum was a Roman territory along the Adriatic Sea and was significantly northwest of the Macedonian cities where Acts shows Paul ministering. This is a reminder that Acts is selective rather than totally comprehensive in treating Paul’s ministry. It is not impossible that Paul himself ministered in Illyricum, but more likely that co-workers or representatives of the Macedonian churches had done so. Paul would have considered this an extension of his own ministry. In any event, the Jerusalem-Illyricum arc covered an enormous land mass, an area estimated as covering some three hundred thousand square miles.⁵

In verse 20 Paul reached the final conclusion to which he had been driving since verse 14: he was a *pioneer* missionary; it was his aim to preach the gospel where it had never before been taken. This concept seems to have been at the heart of Paul’s understanding of apostleship: an apostle is one called by Christ to do pioneer missionary work in a sphere where the gospel has not yet reached. Paul’s own sphere was that of the Gentiles. As true pioneers, apostles do not “build on someone else’s foundation” (v. 20). Paul expressed this conviction in more detail in 2 Cor 10:13-17. There he was seeking to justify his claim to being a true apostle to the Corinthians, since he was the first to bring them the gospel (2 Cor 10:14). Others had come to Corinth claiming to be apostles. Paul pointed to the illegitimacy of their claim. They were false apostles, since they were working in another’s (Paul’s) sphere of influence.

Paul did not want to come under the same charge at Rome as he had himself brought against the false apostles at

Corinth. No apostle had preceded Paul in Rome.⁶ He could legitimately establish a ministry in the city.

In this particular case, Paul was not so much seeking to establish his own mission in Rome but rather to use the Roman churches as his base for a new pioneer work, a ministry in Spain and the Roman west (15:22-24). Verse 22 explains why Paul had not yet been able to come to Rome: the work in the east had demanded all his time and effort. Now, however, Paul had completed his ministry in the east and was free to break new ground in the west. Obviously there was still much room for witness in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, but Paul had established a foundation. The churches he had founded were now equipped for ministry in their area and the surrounding territory. Ever the pioneer missionary, Paul was now ready to move to regions where no Christian witness yet existed. Spain and points west provided fertile ground.

Paul does not seem to have planned a long stay in Rome, but only to see the Roman Christians “in passing” (“while going through”) on his way to Spain. He also hoped that the Romans would “send him forth” on that journey. Paul used a technical term for “sending forth” (*propempe*) that was often used for furnishing someone with the necessary provisions for their journey. In all likelihood Paul was not just hoping that the Roman churches would provide for him on his trip to Spain, but that they would continue to support him materially throughout his mission there. Just as Antioch had been his supporting congregation in his missions in the east, now he was hoping that the Roman Christians would support his ministry in the west, that they would become his “western Antioch.”

Paul's Delay (15:25-33)

In verse 25 Paul explained that his trip to Rome would be further delayed for a while in order that he might take an offering to Jerusalem to aid the Christians there. He noted how the Greek cities had been pleased to collect such an offering. He mentioned Macedonia (which would include Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea) and Achaia (Corinth). Paul's other churches seem to have participated as well. First Corinthians 16:1 mentions Galatians in connection with the collection, and the list of church representatives who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the offering includes both Galatians and Asians (Acts 20:4). Verse 27 establishes the principle of mutuality expressed in the collection, a point Paul also made in relation to the collection in 2 Cor 8:13-15. In Romans Paul pointed out that the Gentile Christians had been spiritually blessed by receiving the gospel, a blessing which ultimately came from the Jewish Christians. Now that the Jerusalem churches were in physical need it was only fitting that their Gentile fellow Christians provide them with material blessings.⁷ In verse 28 Paul restated his plan to go to Spain by way of Rome. Verse 29 is an implicit appeal for the Roman approval of his planned visit and mission.

Verses 30-33 complete the section with an appeal for prayer. In verse 30 Paul used “prayer warrior” language as he asked the Roman Christians to strive/fight together with him in prayer. He used a word which means to struggle together as in an athletic meet or a military battle. His requested prayer had three petitions: (1) that he might be delivered from the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, (2) that the collection might be acceptable to the Jerusalem Christians, and (3) that the

fulfillment of these requests would lead to his coming to Rome and joyfully sharing the company of the Christians there (vv. 31-32). It should be noted how Paul had some question about his treatment at the hands of the non-Christian Jews of Jerusalem as well as his reception by the Christians. His trepidation had some basis in fact.

The Fulfillment of Paul's Plans

Paul's desire to visit the Roman churches was ultimately fulfilled, but not in the manner he likely envisioned nor as quickly as he might have wished. Acts relates how he finally reached Rome—not as a free man but as a prisoner in chains. It is questionable how much Paul's prayer was answered that the collection would be acceptable to the Jerusalem Christians. Acts is strangely silent about the collection, which is all the more remarkable when one considers that the collection was Paul's main reason for going to Jerusalem at the end of his third mission and the sole reason for the delay of his visit to Rome and his Spanish mission, as Rom 15:25-29 makes clear. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, Acts 21:17 says that the brothers "received (him) gladly," which may be an indirect reference to the welcome gift. On the other hand, the Jerusalem Christian leaders seemed more concerned with Paul's proving that he was a faithful Jew than in accepting the generous gift from the Gentile Christians. Was the Gentile gift an embarrassment to the Christians that might hamper their witness to the Jews? Is that why Acts is so silent on the subject—it wasn't all that well received? We cannot be sure. Any answer would be somewhat speculative.

Acts is, however, crystal clear on one point—the non-Christian Jews considered

Paul a heretic and were after his neck. Paul was asked by the Christians to participate in a ceremony at the temple to prove his fidelity to Judaism (Acts 21:20-26). The effort backfired, and Paul was besieged on the temple grounds by a Jewish mob that had been stirred up by charges from some Diaspora Jews that Paul sought to lead the Jews "everywhere" to renounce the law and had just now violated the sanctity of the temple. Paul would have been torn to shreds had not a Roman cohort arrived, broken up the riot, and taken Paul into custody (Acts 21:27-36). Paul's requested prayer that he be delivered from the unbelieving Jerusalem Jews (Rom 15:31) was answered, but only by his ending up as a prisoner of Rome. Paul remained under Roman custody for three years or so, first in Jerusalem (Acts 21:37-23:30) and then in the Roman headquarters at Caesarea (Acts 23:31-24:27). Finally, in order to remove the possibility that the Romans might give in to Jewish pressure and deliver him to almost certain death at the hands of the Jews, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal for a trial before Caesar (Acts 25:1-26:32). The appeal was accepted, Paul was transferred to Rome by sea, and Acts ends up with Paul under house arrest in Rome awaiting his hearing before Caesar (Acts 27:1-28:31).

It is interesting to note how much Paul's desire to go to Rome and the Acts narrative coincide. While in prison in Jerusalem, the Lord assured him in a vision that he would witness in Rome (Acts 23:11). Likewise, in the midst of the shipwreck narrative, an angel of the Lord assured Paul that he and all his fellow voyagers would survive the disaster because God was delivering Paul to testify in Rome before Caesar (Acts 27:24). God shared Paul's desire for him to witness

in Rome. The means of his doing so was probably quite different from what Paul imagined when he expressed that desire to the Romans.

The Roman Christians

Corinth was the city where Paul penned his letter to the Romans and the place from which he departed with his collection. Jerusalem was the destination for his collection, which constituted the reason for Paul's delay in going to Rome. What of Rome itself? How much did Paul know about the Roman Christians? How much of the situation in the Roman churches is reflected in Paul's letter to Rome?

Christianity in Rome

How did Christianity reach Rome? The very fact that Paul wrote a letter to the Roman Christians is evidence of a Christian community there. Other evidence exists as well. When Paul was taken under Roman custody to Rome, the final leg of his voyage took him to Puteoli, an Italian port several days' journey south of Rome. Christianity had already reached there, for Paul is said to have stayed a week with the Christians there (Acts 28:14). After that, as he traveled by foot from Puteoli to Rome he was joined by Roman Christians who had traveled south on the Appian Way to meet him (Acts 28:15). Less direct evidence for a pre-Pauline Christian community in Rome is found in the Roman historian Suetonius, who related an incident that occurred during the reign of Claudius that prompted the emperor to expel the Jews from Rome.⁸ According to Suetonius, disturbances arose within the Jewish community which were provoked by a certain person name "Chrestus." The Latin word for Christ is "Christus," and

Suetonius's reference is most likely his misunderstanding of that name. If so, the expulsion of the Jews would have been due to a somewhat tumultuous debate in the synagogues resulting from the arrival there of a Christian witness. Given the violent reaction to Paul's witness in the Diaspora synagogues recorded in Acts (e.g., Acts 17:1-7, 13; 18:12-17), a similar result from the coming of the Christian message is not hard to picture for Rome. The uproar in the synagogues was seen as sufficient threat to the peace of the city for the emperor to expel the Jews. One Jewish couple who had to leave the city at this time were Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2).

The presence of a Christian community in the capital city before Paul's arrival there is certain. But, how did Christianity first come there? It does not seem to have been taken there by an apostle. The tradition of Peter's ministry in Rome and his martyrdom there is in all likelihood accurate,⁹ but he does not seem to have preceded Paul there. Paul's remarks to the Romans about not building on another's foundation (Rom 15:20) seem to preclude Peter's having established a witness in Rome prior to Paul. The most likely manner in which the gospel came to Rome was through the witness of Christian laity, military people like Cornelius the Centurion and business people like Lydia, Priscilla, and Aquila who took the gospel with them wherever they traveled. It is unclear whether the latter two were Christians when they met Paul in Corinth, and unlikely that they had taken the gospel to Rome, but they are prime examples of business people who shared the gospel wherever they went—in Ephesus (Acts 18:26) and later in Rome (Rom 16:3)

It is altogether likely that the Christian

community in Rome began with converts from the synagogues. Throughout Acts Paul is shown to have begun his witness in each city by preaching in the synagogues and drawing the nucleus of the Christian community from them. He even continued that strategy when he arrived in Rome (Acts 28:17-27). An extensive Jewish community was present in Rome, which has been estimated to have been as large as 50,000 people, with synagogues scattered throughout the city.¹⁰ The Christian community may have followed this same pattern. It is not likely that only one Christian community existed. Unlike the Corinthian and Thessalonian letters, where Paul addressed his letter to “the church” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1), Paul addressed Romans to “all those in Rome called to be saints” (Rom 1:7). In a large city like Rome, one meeting place would have been improbable. More likely, multiple house churches existed. This may in part explain the long list of greeting in Romans 16, with many of the names there possibly designating the householders in whose homes the churches met. This would not rule out gatherings on occasion of the larger community.

Conflict in the Community

The Roman churches seem to have had a mixed composition of both Jews and Gentiles. The Roman epistle seems to reflect this. Many references in the epistle point to Gentiles, such as Paul’s reminding his readers of his own role as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 1:5, 13; 15:16). In chapter 11, Paul directly addressed his Gentile readers, rebuking them for any feelings of superiority that they might have over the Jews with regard to their salvation in Christ (Rom 11:13, 28,

31). On the other hand, the letter is replete with Jewish concerns—the discussion of whether Jews had any real advantage over Gentiles with respect to salvation in chapters 2 and 3, the extensive treatment of issues involving the torah in chapters 4 and 7, and the long discussion of the Jewish place in God’s election throughout chapters 9-11. Such issues would seem to have been irrelevant to a purely Gentile readership, but of extreme importance to a community comprised of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Of course, it could be argued that Paul’s mind was more on Jerusalem and the debate he might face there in defending his torah-free gospel before the Jewish community and the more conservative Jewish Christians, but one wonders why Paul would have introduced such discussions in a letter to a strictly Gentile community unless there were Jewish concerns that involved the larger community. It is more likely the community was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles and the differences between the two groups were a source of conflict.

The Controversy (14:1-15:13)

In Rom 14:1-15:13 Paul addressed two groups, which he designated as “the strong” and “the weak.” The “weak” are portrayed as holding three views that put them at odds with the strong. First, they were vegetarian, eating no meat at all (14:2). Second, they held some days in special veneration, while the “strong” considered all days alike (14:5). Third, they seem to have abstained from drinking wine (14:21). Some scholars see this whole section of Romans as general ethical teaching rather than as a reflection of the actual situation within the Roman Christian community. Most, however, would see it as being so specific and

pointed that it must reflect an actual controversy within the Roman churches. This question, of course, is who the two groups represented.

The contrast between the strong and weak reminds one of 1 Corinthians 8-10, where Paul dealt with the problem of idol meat. In Corinthians Paul urged the strong to yield to the scruples of the weak and not eat the idol meat in situations where it might cause the weak to stumble. Likewise in Romans Paul directed the strong to yield in cases where they might cause others to stumble (14:20f., 15:1). There are major differences between the treatments in 1 Corinthians and Romans, however. In 1 Corinthians, the main problem is idol meat and the “stumbling” of the weak is their turning back to their former pagan ways by acknowledging the real existence of the idol to whom the meat had been offered (1 Cor 8:10-11), which is more likely for a Gentile than a Jew. In Romans, the issue does not seem to be idol meat but meat in general as an offense to those who are strict vegetarians. The “stumbling” is not so much returning to paganism as that of considering meat as “unclean” (14:14) and meat-eating as something evil (14:16). Despite his direction for the strong to yield, in Romans Paul shows no patience with either group’s attitudes toward the other. The strong are guilty of despising, disdain, and treating the weak with contempt, while the weak are equally culpable for their censorious judgment of the meat-eaters (14:3). Both groups have forgotten that God is the ultimate judge of each individual (14:4, 10-12). Both groups should learn to accept the differences of others in the example of Christ and not insist on their own way (15:1-7).

Who were the strong and weak among the Roman Christians? The most likely

answer is the Gentiles and the Jews. The three characteristics of the weak seem to point in the general direction of the Jews. The veneration of special days would point to Jewish scruples about the Sabbath. The other two characteristics are not as easily applicable to the Jews, but point to a rather extreme form of asceticism sometimes found in Jewish sectarianism. Some Jews would not drink wine or any alcoholic beverage. This was certainly true of those who took Nazarite vows and was characteristic of some ascetic Jewish sects like the Therapeutae in Egypt. Vegetarian Jews are harder to locate. We have no direct evidence for vegetarian groups among the Jews, but there may well have been some “super-ascetics” who sought to follow the ideal exemplified in the story of the Hebrew youths in Nebuchadnezzar’s court (Dan 1:8-16). In any event, in the conclusion to his treatment of the strong and weak, Paul spoke of two groups—the circumcised (Jews) and the Gentiles (Rom 15:8-9). The disdainful attitudes may not have been characteristic of all the Gentiles in the Roman churches, and the extreme ascetics may not have comprised all the Christian Jews in Rome, but the problem was pervasive enough for Paul to devote a significant portion of his letter to it. We cannot be sure what role the Roman house churches played in the controversy. Some of them may have been entirely Jewish or entirely Gentile in membership. Some or all may have had a mixed Jew/Gentile composition. The conflict may thus have been between separate communities or within individual congregations.

The question remains as to how Paul would have obtained his information on a problem within a community he did not establish nor had ever visited. The same question could be raised about the long

list of greetings in chapter 16. How did Paul know all these Roman Christians? The truth of the matter is that there was probably more contact between communities in the Roman world than we often realize. The Romans had an excellent road system, and travelers from one community to another were often laden with extensive correspondence for other people's friends and relatives. Rome was not that far removed from Corinth, being only a few days' journey away by ship across the Adriatic and up the main Italian highways from Brundisium to Rome.

The Greetings in Romans 16

Paul characteristically concluded his epistles with an exchange of greetings. Romans is no exception. In fact, the long list of greetings in Romans is longer than any other Pauline epistle. This, along with some other considerations, has led a number of scholars to postulate that the chapter was originally a portion of a letter sent to Ephesus, a congregation where Paul had ministered for three years and thus had many acquaintances.¹¹ Those who hold this view note how Rom 15:33 is a benediction. Since Paul often concluded his letters with a benediction, it is argued that the Roman epistle ended at 15:33 and the fragment to Ephesus has been appended at this point.¹² As we now proceed through the list of greetings, we will test this theory further as we go.

Paul first included a brief recommendation of Phoebe, whom he identified as a servant or deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchrea (16:1-3). The word *diakonos* is a general term for servant and eventually became a term for an officer in the church. In the Pastoral Epistles it has the latter meaning, but with regard to Phoebe

the context is not sufficient to determine whether she held a formal office or was simply one who had rendered some ministry to the church. In any event, she had provided service to the church at Cenchrea, the Corinthian port on the Aegean Sea. Paul further described her as a "patron" (*prostatis*) who had helped him and many others. A patron was one who supported others, generally in a material sense. It is possible that Phoebe provided her home for the church meetings at Cenchrea, much as Lydia seems to have done for Philippi (Acts 16:40). In any event she was traveling to Rome, and Paul wanted the church there to welcome her. Such letters of introduction were common in Paul's day. Those who hold the Ephesian hypothesis argue that Paul's recommendation would have carried more weight at Ephesus, where Paul was well known. Such is not necessarily the case. In the ancient world, the status of the recommender was what carried weight. Paul was an apostle and of high status in Christian circles. His recommendation would have been well received at Rome.

Paul's first greeting was to Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3-5a).¹³ They had been Paul's co-workers from the time he first met them in Corinth (Acts 18:2). When he left Corinth, the pair accompanied him to Ephesus, where they remained in ministry when Paul returned to Antioch (Acts 16:18-26). Those who hold the Ephesian hypothesis note that the last mention of the couple in Acts is this very passage—in Ephesus, not Rome. It must be remembered, however, that the two had come to Corinth from Rome because of Claudius' expulsion of the Jews (Acts 18:2). Upon Claudius's death in A.D. 54, the edict of expulsion was lifted, and the Jews were allowed to return to the city.

It is quite likely that Priscilla and Aquila had taken advantage of that situation. Exactly when they had risked their lives for Paul is not known (16:4). It could have been in connection with the Jewish mob in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17) or at the time of the Ephesian riot (Acts 19:21-41), but we have no evidence to support either. In any event, they were now back in Rome, and a congregation met in their home. Since they were Jews, it may have been a predominantly Jewish Christian group.

Romans 16:5b speaks of Epaenetus as “the first convert in Asia.” Asia is Paul’s usual designation for Ephesus, which was the major city in which he ministered in the Roman Province of Asia. The first convert in Asia would most likely be located in Ephesus, to be sure. But, it would not be impossible that he had moved to Rome. In fact, the Ephesian Christians were probably aware of his status as the first convert in the area. The Roman Christians might not have known this. Now that he was a member of the Roman community, his acquaintance with Paul would have been a means of furthering Paul’s introduction to Rome.

In verse six Paul sent greetings to Mary, whom he described as having “worked hard/toiled” (*kopiaō*) for the Romans. It is striking how many women are included in Paul’s list of greetings. In addition to Phoebe, Priscilla, and Mary should be added Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12), Persis (v. 12), Rufus’s mother (v. 13), Julia (v. 15), and Nereus’s sister (v. 15). The name Junia (v. 7) should probably also be added to the list. A variant in the manuscript tradition has the masculine form of the name (Junias), but the feminine form (Junia) is better attested.¹⁴ She was probably the wife of Andronicus. Paul describes the pair as “outstanding/prominent (*episēmoi*)

among the apostles.” This could be construed either as including them among the ranks of the apostles or recognizing the high regard in which they were held in apostolic circles. In either case, Paul was recognizing their service. One should not miss how many of these women were recognized for their contribution to the church—Phoebe for her ministry at Cenchrea (v. 1), Priscilla for risking her life for Paul and his ministry (v. 4), Mary for working so diligently for the Roman Christians (v. 6), Junia for her service in apostolic circles (v. 7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa for serving as the Lord’s workers (v. 12), and Persis, who also “worked hard” for the Lord (v. 12). Not only the sheer number of women greeted but Paul’s constant reference to their Christian service bears eloquent testimony to the role that women filled in the ministry of the early churches.

One should also note the balance between Jewish and Gentile (both Greek and Latin) names in Paul’s long list of greetings. Priscilla and Aquila were Jewish (Acts 18:2). Paul described Andronicus and Junia as his “kin,” that is, fellow Jews (v. 7). The same designation is applied to Herodion as well (v. 11). Names like Mary (v. 6) were likely Jewish, while others were common Gentile names—Hermes, Hermas, Julia, Olympas, and the like. The variety of names points to the mixed nature of the Roman church. It is quite possible that they point to individual house churches. This is certainly true for the church that met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (v. 5). The mention of “all the saints” who were “with” the various persons mentioned in verse 15 also likely points to an individual congregation.

Verses 17 to 20 serve to separate Paul’s personal greetings from the greetings he

sends from others in verses 21 to 23. This has led some to see this section as support for chapter 16 being addressed to Ephesus and the false teaching that later plagued that church.¹⁵ No real reason exists for seeing this section as an intrusion in Paul's letter to the Romans. He was well aware of divisions in the congregation and had already addressed that problem in 14:1-15:13. Christians who were divided over such non-essential matters as food and drink would certainly be subject to being led astray on more significant issues. Verse 17 bids the Roman Christians to "look out for" those who would create divisions and lead them astray from the sound doctrine they had been taught. Paul had already had to fight the intrusion of such false teachings—the Judaizers at Galatia, the "super-apostles" at Corinth. Before concluding his epistle to the Romans, he sought to warn the Christians there lest such false teachers should descend on them and lead them astray as well.

Verses 21 to 23 send various greetings from Paul's companions in Corinth. Timothy is the first mentioned (v. 21). Of all Paul's co-workers, Timothy seems to have been the closest to the apostle. Joining Paul on his second mission (Acts 16:1-5), he worked with him throughout both his second and third missions (Acts 17:14-15, 18:5, 19:22, 20:4). Paul addressed two letters to Timothy. He listed him as co-sender in the addresses of six other letters (2 Cor, Phil, Col, 1 and 2 Thess, and Phlm). In Philipians Paul called him his "son" and said that he had no other co-worker so selflessly devoted to the work of Christ (Phil 2:19-21). If Timothy is so well-known to us, we can be much less certain about the other three mentioned in verse 21. Lucius was an extremely common Latin name, and it is unlikely that this is the Lucius the

Cyrenian mentioned in Acts 13:1.¹⁶ Jason is possibly the same as the one with whom Paul stayed in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9), but that also is rather unlikely, as that too was a common name. As for Sosipater, we know nothing of him except for this brief greeting in Romans.

Tertius sent his greeting in verse 22 and called himself the "writer" of the letter. This identifies him as Paul's amanuensis or secretary to whom the apostle dictated the letter. Paul seems to have often used an amanuensis and sometimes wrote his concluding remarks in his own hand as a sort of seal of authenticity (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17). It is also possible that when Paul mentioned a co-sender in the address of a letter that person served as his amanuensis.

Paul concluded with three final greetings (v. 23), all probably from Corinthian Christians. Two are of special significance. First is Gaius, the person with whom Paul was lodging when he wrote the letter. He is probably the same Gaius whom Paul spoke of as one of two Corinthians he had baptized (1 Cor 1:14). Next is Erastus, who Paul identified as the steward or treasurer of the city. In the excavations of Corinth, an inscription dating from the first century was discovered on a theater plaza which identified a person named Erastus as the treasurer of the city who authorized the construction of the plaza.¹⁷ It is quite likely that the Erastus of the inscription is the same city treasurer as the Erastus who was sending greetings to his Christian brothers and sisters in Rome.¹⁸ The ultimate purpose of Romans was to serve as an introduction to Paul and to pave the way for his coming. The extensive list of greetings surely helped to further his introduction.

Romans concludes with a doxology,

actually two if one includes verse 24. The “grace benediction” of verse 24 parallels the closing words of verse 20 and is rather poorly attested, being omitted by the earliest witnesses. On the other hand, the benediction of verses 25-27 is very well-attested and in most witnesses comes at the end of chapter 16. In other witnesses, however, it is found at the end of chapter 14 or at the end of chapter 15 or even at the end of both chapters 14 and 16 in the same manuscript. The textual confusion seems to be attributable to the heretic Marcion, who omitted chapters 15 and 16 from the text of Romans, leading to the subsequent placing of the final benediction at the end of the truncated text. The content of the benediction focuses on a theme dear to Paul—the “mystery” of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s saving plan through Jesus Christ (compare Col 1:26-27).

Conclusion

This article has focused on the “less theological” portion of Romans, chapters 14-16, and their reflection of Paul’s purpose in writing the epistle. If there is one thing that ties these chapters together, it is the theme of the unity of all believers in Christ. Paul’s reason for delaying his visit to the Romans was his concern for the unity of the church as expressed in the Jerusalem collection. It was so real a concern for Paul that he was willing to delay his mission to the west and to risk the very real danger that he knew faced him in Jerusalem. Paul’s treatment of the division between the strong and the weak in chapters 14 and 15 is likewise consumed with the desire for a unified church. Paul could care less about the differences between the groups. They were indifferent matters for him, disputes over non-essential matters, not significant

doctrinal differences. What did bother Paul was how these minor differences were dividing the church. Paul’s whole ministry in a real sense had been devoted to the unity of the body of Christ, to Jew and Gentile united around their common bond in Jesus Christ. That was what the collection was all about. He wanted to see the same unity among the diverse Roman house churches—the unity of a shared faith in Christ among all people, both Jew and Gentile (Rom 16:26).

ENDNOTES

¹This discussion is treated at length in K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (exp. ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

²For a fuller treatment of Paul’s collection, see J. B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 306-12.

³First Corinthians was written toward the end of Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus, around A.D. 55-56 and thus within a year or so of Paul’s winter in Corinth.

⁴Corinth’s reluctance to participate in the collection was probably related to their strained relationship with Paul at this time. See Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*, 258-59.

⁵J. Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 106-07.

⁶Romans 15:20 is one of the clearest evidences that Peter did not establish the Roman church. Paul did not see his witnessing in Rome as building on another apostle’s foundation.

⁷The Jerusalem Christians seem to have suffered from poverty more than once. An earlier collection for them was provided by the Antioch church (Acts 11:27-30). Some scholars attribute the Jerusalem poverty to a failure of their

practice of sharing as recorded in Acts 4-5. It is more likely to have been due to drought and crop failure to which Palestine was particularly vulnerable.

⁸Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25:4.

⁹For Peter in Rome, see O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).

¹⁰See H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (updated ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 229-38.

¹¹For a fuller treatment of the Ephesian hypothesis and its relation to the textual problem of the benedictions in Romans 14-16, see Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*, 281-82.

¹²Some scholars have seen more than one edition of Romans—one to Rome, ending at chapter 15, and one to Ephesus, including chapters 1-13 and 16. See T. W. Manson, "St. Paul's Letter to the Romans—and Others," *The Romans Debate*, 2-15.

¹³Paul calls her by her formal name Prisca. The form Priscilla is a diminutive and more of a nick-name ("little Prisca").

¹⁴See R. S. Cervin, "A Note Regarding the Name 'Junia(s)' in Romans 16:7," *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 464-70.

¹⁵In his Miletus address to the Ephesian elders Paul warned that false teachers would come after him and prey on their flock (Acts 20:29-30).

¹⁶It would be attractive to see this as a reference to Luke, since Luke was with Paul at the end of his third mission, as indicated by the presence of "we" throughout Acts 20:5-21:18. Luke, however, is a Greek name and not to be confused with the Latin Lucius. Lucius seems

to have been a Jew who took on a Gentile second name, a common practice among Diaspora Jews. Paul describes all those in verse 21 as his (Jewish) "kin."

¹⁷See H. J. Cadbury, "Erastus of Corinth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50 (1931): 42-58; D. W. J. Gill, "Erastus the Aedile," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 293-301.

¹⁸It is possible but less certain that the Corinthian treasurer is the same as the Erastus mentioned as a co-worker of Paul in Acts 19:22 or the Erastus of 2 Tim 4:20.