

Welcoming as Christ has welcomed

Paul's challenge to Christians in Rome

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Therefore, welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom. 15:7).¹ Everything in Romans leads, in one way or another, to this forceful and challenging conclusion. Paul boils down the theological substance of the entire argument (“as Christ has welcomed you [all]”) with the practical issue of increasingly critical and urgent importance (“welcome one another”).

Romans is not designed primarily as a book of unchanging doctrine, a systematic theology deposited for all time and places,

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and focused around how a private and isolated individual can get right with God (the classic Protestant view of “justification by faith”). Rather, what we have in Romans is a contextually articulated, practical-pastoral theology. Paul hopes that this theology can unify a movement on the verge of disintegration into factional divisions, both locally and globally, an outcome that Paul is energetically and desperately seeking to prevent.

Romans is primarily about resolving a crisis of relationships in the community of Christ’s faithful, in connection with God’s plan to realize true justice and peace throughout the whole world.

The context

Having just come through a harrowing experience of imprisonment, torture, and hardship in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8; 7:5–6), in early 56 CE Paul is resting and convalescing in Corinth. He has travel plans on his mind, but for the moment he must wait, reflect, study scripture, and pray, as all the major seafaring ships are moored at port for the winter season (from approximately mid-November to mid-March).

Paul is especially contemplating what is happening on the simultaneously hopeful and ominous horizon. From a vantage point a few hundred meters from town, he can see the sun rise on the sea to the east, and he can see the sun set on the sea to the west. Looking east, he thinks of Jerusalem. He has not been there for eight years, and the last time he was there he formally established a partnership with the leaders of the Jerusalem congregation, by which his ministry among the nations-Gentiles was affirmed, on the condition that he would remember the poor (Gal. 2:1-10). But the tensions between the mother church and his network of assemblies outside of Judea have only heightened, and he fears the growing divide will probably get worse.

Once travel season opens, Paul expects to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost, to deliver practical assistance to the poor of Judea, who are suffering from famine and an unjust system of imperial tribute. Paul sees this undertaking as a token of unity and partnership across the waters that divide. It is also a way of enacting the fulfillment of prophecy—that at the dawn of the age to come, the nations would make pilgrimage and bring their tribute to Jerusalem, reversing the outflow of wealth experienced for hundreds of years.²

Turning toward the horizon to the west, Paul sees both new opportunity in Spain and also foreboding amid crises in Rome. Though he has never been to Rome, he has many friends and co-workers there (Rom. 16), and through correspondence with them he has kept up on the dynamics in this strategically located centre. The Jesus loyalists in Rome are organized around multiple house assemblies, and increasing disputes have meant that not all remain in communion with each other.³

Using a shorthand not unlike our “liberal” and “conservative,” Paul describes the two main factions as “those who are weak in conviction (loyalty-faith)”⁴ and “those who are strong-powerful.” This simplistic binary names convictional differences, while also reflecting socioeconomic divisions.⁵ What we can discern is that the “weak,” who appear to be primarily from a Judean (Jewish) heritage, were biblical traditionalists, claiming ancient biblical and unchanging standards for conduct. By contrast, the “strong-powerful,” who appear to include people from both Judean and non-Judean backgrounds, were messianic revisionists (in the

manner of Paul), claiming a new pattern for conduct revealed through Messiah Jesus, stressing loyalty and conviction over against detailed rules propounded by Moses the lawgiver. The watchword of this group, which Paul endorses, is apparently “freedom in Christ” (cf. Gal. 3–5; 1 Cor. 8:9; 2 Cor. 3; Rom. 7).

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This local divide thus replicates the mounting gulf among Jesus loyalists worldwide. At one end are mainly Judean Jesus Messianists (“Christians”) ⁶ committed to a detailed, literal interpretation and application of Torah. This group is centred in Jerusalem, with thousands embracing this perspective (Acts 21). On the other side there is the overwhelming majority of non-Judean adher-

ents (alongside a core group from a Judean heritage, like Paul himself), who see potential new members from the nations as free from many of the regulations of Torah, especially those regulations that appear to be mainly Judean (Jewish) identity markers.⁷ What it means to be “practicing” (in regard to regulations for ethical “walking”) is a hotly contested matter, and the cause of increasing tensions and divisions.⁸ The letter is thus deliberately addressed to “*all* God’s beloved,” as Paul seeks to embrace all the factional components now tearing the community of Christ apart (14:1–15:13). Along the way, Paul makes it clear that *both* those of Judean heritage *and* those of non-Judean heritage are equally named as beloved (9:25–26; 11:28).

Meanwhile, Paul has come to realize that the differences between the weak and the strong are so intractable that it will likely be impossible for both sides to come to an agreement on some hotly contested questions. In this circumstance, how can the strong and the weak ever welcome each other? How might it be possible to avert a massive split over a single lightning-rod issue that could scar the church forever? These are the questions that drive the entire argument of Romans.

Much is at stake for Paul. Paul’s vision is for a movement that will grow to eventually reconcile the whole world (11:32; 15:7–13). If the church in the capital city of a massive empire remains

divided, how should one ever expect the global church to remain a single movement? And might we even start to doubt the breadth of God's vision of restoration in Christ? The very integrity and efficacy of the gospel is at stake.⁹

The argument

Paul writes Romans, then, deeply conscious of what is on the horizon, both east and west, and with a fair bit of time on his

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hands as he waits for the season for traveling by ship to reopen. Romans is Paul's longest and most complex letter. It is both essay and appeal, organized in four densely packed movements, all interconnected with recurring and developing motifs, and each concluding with a dramatic crescendo (4:24–25; 8:31–39; 11:32–36; 15:7–13).

With complex issues to discuss and intractable issues to resolve, Paul writes in ways that are not always straightforward; it is not always obvious what particular points he wishes to score with his divided audience. Paul seems to be aware of how each side might be listening to how he either supports their position or rebukes the other side. One

can only imagine the challenge faced by Phoebe (16:1–2), who was sent as Paul's personal representative along with the letter, and no doubt tasked with explaining orally its more ambiguous or difficult points, bridging the divide between the weak and the strong.

The prevailing theme at the outset of Romans is God's new justice-righteousness and justification (making right) over against universal human injustice and retribution. At the core of Paul's theological argument, designed to realize and sustain a unified community into the future, is the conviction that Christ welcomes in a way that demonstrates a radically new framework of justice-righteousness, what can appropriately be called "restorative justice." God's new framework of justice and justification through Christ is not simply a pardon that leaves the prior and prevailing retributive justice system otherwise intact, where a select few

receive a free ticket to heaven while the rest of humanity is consigned to eternal damnation. God's new system of justice, which transforms the offender and reconciles the offender and the offended, involves a complete reorientation and transfer into what Paul calls the "regime of grace," away from the "regime of law." Paul's firm conviction is that only by seeing the other through this new lens can one truly welcome and be reconciled with the other. Eventually, then, the theme of justice-righteousness gives way, as the letter unfolds, to images of reconciliation, mercy, forgiveness, liberation, filiation (adoption as heirs), transformation, and re-creation, and ultimately to divine and human welcome.¹⁰

In the first movement Paul shows how the system of retributive justice ("wrath") that has been in force up to the present will itself be undone, as it gives way to God's new system of a restoring justice through Christ, under the banner of merciful generosity (grace). Indeed, God's newly revealed system of justice-righteousness is displayed precisely in an act of divine generosity and forbearance, whereby all previously committed offenses are "passed over" (3:21–25; 4:25).

The second movement (chaps. 5–8) focuses around a comparison and contrast of three "regimes": the regimes of error (sin), of law, and of grace. Paul's makes the case that only by a transfer to the regime of grace can the error (sin) problem of humanity finally be conquered (Rom. 5:12–8:13); the regime of law is incapable of fully transforming the human condition.

The third movement explains how God's mercy in the regime of grace will ultimately conquer all human infidelity (see esp. 9:16, 22–23). By way of climax Paul asserts: "For God has confined (enclosed, imprisoned) all humanity into disobedience, with the ultimate aim that God will have mercy on all humanity" (11:32). And all Paul can do in response is launch into doxology, admitting that this hope goes beyond his ability to comprehend (11:33–36).

The final movement (12:1–15:13) articulates a kind of moral code, not by reference to the sanctions of law, but by reference to God's mercies, the restoring action of God. Earlier, Paul challenged the confidence of those who seek to know God's will and discern what really counts simply on the basis of Torah (2:18). Now he emphasizes that to discern the will of God requires a

renewal of the mind that emerges through the transformative power supplied by the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1–2).

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love one's neighbor. "The one who loves the other has fulfilled the law" is an assertion important enough to be repeated: "Love is the fullness of the law" (13:8, 10; cf. 12:9).

Back to the controversy on the ground

Paul finally comes to the crux of the dispute that is raging locally and globally among Jesus followers. Christians today are accustomed to thinking that the particular issues at stake here were inconsequential, not among the things that really matter, and pertaining

simply to rules about food, or observances of days. But that would hardly have been the view of both parties. The dispute pertained to the interpretation of the moral laws of scripture. What might have been a matter of relaxed indifference to one group, who considered themselves free from certain rules of scripture because of Christ (Paul and the strong), was a matter that for the other party (the weak) negated the very status of the unchanging word of God, the Torah divinely revealed through Moses. Realizing that the sides are working from vastly different premises, Paul pleads for the strong to cease despising, and for the weak to desist from judging.

Addressing both sides in the biblical-ethical dispute, Paul's appeal is designed for all the partisans to hear. Still, some sections seem framed to apply especially to one side or the other. On the one hand, Paul first challenges especially the scripture-literalist, law-oriented weak, whose main posture is to judge: "God has welcomed [the strong]. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (14:3b–4, NRSV). They are never to question the fact that God has fundamentally welcomed those whom they deem morally unclean. God has offered radical welcome on terms newly revealed in Christ, on the basis of absolute generosity. Therefore

they ought never to take the place of God, who is the one who will make final judgments, and to whose tribunal all claims should be deferred (14:10–12).

On the other hand, Paul speaks to the strong just as forcefully (14:14–23). They must always be attentive to the virtues of love, peace, justice, and mutual upbuilding (14:15, 17, 19), lest their despising of the weak puts a stumbling block before them, causing them to fall (away) and thereby destroying them. Moreover, they must never let their behavior be based on mere trendiness, soft thinking, even if they are free from the law. Using the same verb for “discernment” as in 12:2 (and 2:18), Paul stresses that any conduct that has not gone through careful discernment is not worthy of acceptance. “The conviction¹¹ that you have, have as your own before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves, because of what they discern. But those [among the strong] who are uncertain are condemned when they eat, because they do not act from conviction; for whatever does not proceed from conviction (based on persuasion) is error” (14:22–23). Here Paul seems to conclude with a proverbial statement in the Socratic tradition: anything not subject to careful scrutiny is potentially mere error.¹² Earlier Paul has claimed to know the correctness of his own position (and that of the strong)

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by careful persuasion, although he doesn’t explain what exactly has gone into that persuasion (14:14).

One of the most important arguments, then, is that *all* must be fully convinced in their own minds (14:5), because each person individually will be required to give an account before God (14:12). Moreover, partisans on each side must acknowledge that the other is seeking in good faith to live and act in complete devotion to the Lord (14:6–9). Paul advises that whereas all Jesus loyalists are ultimately seeking to live in dedicated

service to God, they should all focus on their own lives in relation to God (14:4–8, 22). That is, they shouldn’t be constantly looking over their shoulders to check out what someone else is doing. All must be convinced in their own minds without prejudging or

focusing on the other. They must be ready to give an answer for their own behavior directly to Christ himself, whose tribunal is the only one that truly counts. They are not to be preoccupied about what is wrong with the other (14:5–12, 22–23).

So then, whenever they welcome each other, they ought to do so not for the purposes of debating divisive issues (14:1). Those kinds of conversation might easily degenerate into solidifying even further unresolvable differences, leading to an irreparable split. Rather, they must somehow find a way to be in communion with each other, giving each other some generous space, as Christ has, so that they can give glory to God as one in spirit and with a united voice (15:6).

Notes

¹ Paul uses the plural “you,” y’all. Translations in this essay are mine, though following standard English versions, especially the NRSV.

² For detailed discussion, see Gordon Zerbe, “Partnership and Equality: Paul’s Economic Theory,” in *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2012), 76–82.

³ For a history of the assemblies in Rome, see John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004), 21–29.

⁴ Paul uses the flexible term *pistis*. *Pistis* can have the nuance of (a) reliance, faith, trust, (b) loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, (c) conviction, belief, or (d) proof, persuasion. Sometimes a number of these possible senses are implied in a given use of *pistis*. The weakness here in Paul’s view seems to be a combination of presumed weakness of conviction but also of loyalty (as a core feature of their way to relating to Christ). In 1 Corinthians, referring to a somewhat similar perspective, Paul uses the term “weakness of conscience” (1 Cor. 8:7,10; or just the “weak,” 1 Cor. 8:9, 11) in contrast to “those who have knowledge” (1 Cor. 8:4, 7, 10, 11). In Romans 15:1 the weak are also called the “non-strong,” whose weaknesses the strong have an obligation to support.

⁵ “Weak” and “strong” were regularly used in Paul’s world to refer to the poor and the rich. Many in the weak, non-powerful group, especially those of Judean descent, will only have returned to Rome in the year 54, when the expulsion order for all Judeans-Jews was lifted. They will have lost financial assets, not only leadership roles and predominance in the broader group of Jesus loyalists in Rome.

⁶ At this stage in history, the term “Christian” is anachronistic, as it implies a movement and theology completely divorced from Judeans (Jews) and Judaism. See V. G. Shillington, *Jesus and Paul before Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

⁷ Paul never advises those born Judean (Jewish) to forsake the Torah; he only argues that internationals (Gentiles) do not need to become fully Torah observant to be true loyalists of Messiah Jesus.

⁸ Things are far more complex than two main groupings. The New Testament attests to at least six distinct positions or groupings along a rough continuum, from those who are “zealous for the Law” (Acts 15:1, 5; 21:17–22), to those associated with James

(and the “men of James,” Gal 2:11–13), to those close to the positions of Cephas/Peter and Barnabas, to Paul and his movement, to the Johannine community and those who departed from it. See Zerbe, *Citizenship*, 245n2.

⁹ In hindsight we know that Paul’s wild hope to keep the worldwide church united was not realized. Maybe even he had doubts, as many came to conclude: Will it not be easier to reframe salvation simply in terms of the experience of the private individual, and allow pockets of believers to remain in their own solitudes? And might it not be easier to think of world Christianity and the unity of the church as a merely aspirational concept? What actually happened was that the Bible-literalists (“the weak”) were disinherited, as the liberal “strong” became the numerical (Gentile) majority, and as the centre for the “weak” in Jerusalem was decimated by the war with Rome (66–74 CE). Meanwhile, the freedom-embracing Gentile Jesus loyalists eventually developed their own sharp way of defining boundaries to identify heretics, on the basis of their own new rule-based schemes.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the contours of Paul’s main argument, see Gordon Zerbe, “From Retributive to Restorative Justice in Romans,” *Direction* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 43–58; online at <http://www.directionjournal.org/>.

¹¹ See above, n4. Given the emphasis in these verses on discernment, judging (in the sense of “critically assessing”), and not having doubts, the emphasis with *pistis* here is on having conviction, based on careful persuasion/proof. Cf. the emphasis on being fully convinced in 14:5.

¹² The word *hamartia* is the ordinary word for “error,” even though it is typically used in the sense of “sin” in the New Testament.

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