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THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS: PROFOUND THEOLOGY FOR THE SAKE OF MISSIONS[1]

by Marcus A. Mininger

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,

Our text for consideration is, in some ways, the entire book of Romans because we will be reflecting on the relation between the content of Romans and its stated purpose, as described in the letter itself. The former of these is in many ways quite familiar to those in our tradition. Yet the latter is significantly less so, which is why we have read Romans 1:1–17 and 15:14–33. Together, those two passages frame the entire body of Paul's argument in Romans and comment directly on his reasons for writing it. In this way, they help place the whole of the letter in a particular context, allowing us to see why it exists and contains the specific sort of content it does.

The Epistle to the Romans is a heavily used Bible book within our Protestant tradition. I wonder what mainly comes to your mind when you think of it.

I'm sure most of us here tonight can mentally scan through a great deal of the theological content of Romans without too much effort, from its opening announcement of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation for all who believe in 1:16 to its memorable description of natural revelation and God's wrath in 1:18–32; to key prooftexts regarding total depravity (3:10–18), universal sinfulness (3:23), propitiation of wrath (3:25–26), and justification by faith alone (4:4–5); its magisterial federal theology in 5:12–21; its clear insistence that justification should not lead to antinomianism (ch. 6), yet that the Law itself is also unable to sanctify us (ch. 7); the great conflict between flesh and Spirit it describes as well as rich reflections on

1. This article is a revised version of an address given on April 9, 2021 at New Covenant Community Church (OPC) in Joliet, IL as part of the installation service for Rev. Bruce H. Hollister to become Regional Home Missionary of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Presbytery of the Midwest. An earlier, shorter version of this article also appeared in May 2023 edition of *Ordained Servant: A Journal for Church Officers*, which can be found here: https://www.opc.org/os.html?issue_id=187.

Christian assurance and future hope (ch. 8); its stalwart depiction of God's sovereignty in election and reprobation (ch. 9); its insistence on one way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles throughout chapters 9–11 and elsewhere; its clear description of the legitimacy of civil government and Christian submission to it (ch. 13); and perhaps the most precise description we have of adiaphora, or actions that are neither commanded nor forbidden, in Christian ethics (chs. 14–15). These are the kinds of things that we most often go to Romans for and that tend to most readily come to mind when we think of this letter, all of which is a wonderful provision for the church in Paul's day and in our own.

Yet, I want to ask if, when you think of Romans, you also typically think of another topic that I haven't mentioned so far: missions. There's a good chance you do not.

We're here tonight to install Rev. Bruce Hollister as Regional Home Missionary for the Presbytery of the Midwest of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. As we do this, I want us to reflect together on how Romans, one of the most theologically robust books in all of Scripture, is indelibly and throughout its pages a missionary document. That is, a document written to prepare for, make possible, and guide a new missionary endeavor to an unreached part of the ancient world. As we think about this, I hope we will be impressed by the very phenomenon of the letter to the Romans itself and what its very nature and design teach us: how this rich, nuanced, profound, lengthy theological document is all of those things precisely for the express purpose of facilitating missions within the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You see, it is crucial to appreciate how Romans joins two things that the church over the centuries has often had a difficult time holding together—or has sometimes even regarded as conflicting with each other. Namely deep, nuanced theology, on the one hand, and missionary outreach to a depraved world, on the other.

With the exception of Romans 1:16–17, the passages we read this evening are generally not among the most well-known or well-used texts of Romans. On reflection, though, they are still some of the most important texts for understanding the Epistle as a whole. I'm sure we would all generally agree that knowing who wrote a document, when they wrote it, to whom, and why helps enormously with understanding what a person wrote and how it is significant. Yet despite this fact, perhaps nowhere in Scripture are details like these more frequently and systemically overlooked than with Romans, which people routinely take as something of an abstract, situationless, theological treatise—a treasure-trove for theological proof-texting. But as the last five decades of scholarship on Romans have emphasized, viewing Romans as a generalized, situation-unspecific treatise is inadequate.[2] While

2. This shift in scholarly perspective was precipitated in many ways by Paul S. Minear's monograph *Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans*, SBT 2/19 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1971). To see some of the mature fruit of this perspectival shift, with particular interest in the missional purpose of Romans, see especially Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Herm (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007). While there are a great deal of topics on which Reformed Christians must certainly disagree with Jewett, his consistent efforts to read the whole of Romans in light of Paul's stated purpose in the letter is something from which we Reformed readers have much to learn and provides a valuable

Romans is theologically very deep, it is undoubtedly not context free. To the contrary, Romans itself tells us that it is written within and designed to address a very specific context. As such, it is pastorally shaped all throughout for a particular audience, especially with an eye to helping that audience engage in new missionary endeavors from Rome to Spain.

The fact that Romans is a missionary document is indicated by many things in the letter, but especially by the sections we read from Romans 1 and 15. When we look closely at these sections, we should notice an extended set of verbal and thematic parallels between them. This includes references to:

1. The "gospel of God" (an unusual phrase for Paul, in 1:1; 15:16)
2. The distinct grace given to Paul to serve the Gentiles (1:5; 15:15–16)
3. The specific purpose of this ministry to the Gentiles was to bring about their obedience (1:5; 15:18; see also 16:26)
4. Paul's awareness of the strength of the Roman churches (1:8; 15:14)
5. Paul's desire to visit the Romans (1:11; 15:23)
6. The reasons for Paul's absence from Rome previously (1:13; 15:22)
7. Paul's desire to impart something to the Romans, but also clearly to receive something in return (notice a progressive heightening of terms in 1:11–12; 15:15, 23, 28, 32, which eventually come to include a desire to receive financial help from Rome)
8. Concern for the hope of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles and the defense of God's uprightness in giving salvation to both (1:16–17; 15:8–12)
9. Paul's commitment to minister to all kinds of people, including barbarians (1:14) and the Spanish (15:24, 28), whom people in Rome would have viewed as a chief example of barbarians

Taken together, all of these parallels between Romans 1 and 15 comprise an elaborate, multi-faceted *inclusio* around the entire body of the letter. In the ancient world, such an *inclusio* functions as a kind of heading, saying, "Everything in between these end-points should be read in connection with what the end-points themselves say." In other words, Paul's composition of Romans, which features both the longest introductory section in all of his letters and the most extended concluding section in all of his letters (which extends beyond what we read through ch. 16), frames the entirety of the letter with several key themes, in relation to which the letter's central content is meant to be understood.

And what do we see when we look at the *inclusio* Paul provides to help us read the letter? Not only that the content of Romans must be read in light of the situation described in this large *inclusio*, which is true, but more particularly that there is really one *main* purpose why Paul writes to Rome, along with three subordinate goals that help support this primary purpose.

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antidote to the aforementioned tendency in the history of interpretation to decontextualize the letter.

On the one hand, then, the main purpose for which Paul writes to the Romans is his desire to have them help him travel to Spain in order to extend the gospel to the previously unreached people there. While many statements in Romans 1 and 15 (and elsewhere) communicate this purpose indirectly, Paul also states the matter plainly in 15:23–24—"But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while." Then, not to be unclear, he reiterates the same idea in 15:28—"When therefore I have completed this [impending trip to Jerusalem] and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you."

On the other hand, though, as we read Romans, we also need to see that, in addition to the main purpose of gaining support for a Spanish mission, there are at least three other significant obstacles that Paul must surmount if he is truly to win the Romans' support for this cause and if that support is going to be truly helpful in the specific ways needed. These three obstacles, evident within the letter, create three additional subordinate goals for Paul as he writes Romans, which could be stated as follows.

First, the Roman Christians lacked clear, accurate knowledge about Paul's message, which could hinder them from supporting him. This lack of knowledge is partly due to his never having visited them before (1:10–15; 15:22), but it is compounded by the existence of unfair critiques of Paul's preaching, which the Romans evidently knew about and were tempted to believe (3:7–8). To address this problem, Paul introduces numerous aspects of his teaching in a way that will inform and overcome misperceptions, enabling the Romans to understand Paul's message more accurately and desire to support his work. This goal of Paul's, to clarify key aspects of his teaching to the Roman Christians, helps explain Romans's systematic nature, covering a broad number of topics in a clearly ordered fashion, especially compared to most of Paul's other letters. Similarly, Paul's need to defend himself against unfair criticism also helps explain the notably apologetic features of the letter, such as the peculiarly defensive note he sounds when he introduces the letter's theme statement in 1:16—"For I am not ashamed of the gospel."

Second, in addition to lacking explicit knowledge about Paul, the Romans also lacked internal unity with each other, which would hinder them from providing unified support to any missions effort. Chapters 14–15 especially show how the church in Rome was experiencing significant internal division, with so-called "weak" Christians judging the "strong" and the "strong" despising the "weak." Regardless of the specific source of this problem, a significantly divided church is certainly not a very stable one for sending and supporting a missionary. Beyond this, the particular topic that divided the Romans concerned which foods to eat and days to observe. Most scholars conclude (rightly, in my view) that this division revolves around whether Christians should continue to follow certain distinctively Jewish practices or not—precisely the kind of controversy that could undermine a future mission to *Gentile* Spain. In addition to introducing and defending his maligned gospel in general, Paul needs to help the Roman churches have greater internal unity on some key topics in Christian ethics as well.

Third, the Roman church was steeped in their culture's externalism and competitive hierarchicalism, which could undermine their motivation to evangelize Spain. Here, we must think not only about the Romans' relationships to Paul and each other but also their prospective relation to any future converts in Spain. We can remember that Paul is concerned not only with the topic of Jew-Gentile relations in Romans but also with Gentile-Gentile relations. As he notes in 1:14, he is obligated to take the gospel not only to wise Gentiles, like the Greeks, but to the comparatively foolish ones too, which he calls barbarians. We should note here that wisdom in the ancient world always correlates with ability or power. So the Romans, who were at the center of power in the first-century ancient world, would naturally see themselves as wise, occupying a position of superiority compared to others in the empire and *especially* to ignorant, unsophisticated peoples in the uneducated and uncouth provinces that Rome had subjugated. So then, if the Roman Christians cannot even accept each other without major divisions, how could they be in a position to reach out to, accept, and have fellowship in one body with converts from the unwashed masses to be found in a seedy backwater like provincial Spain? To do so, they must learn to give up external comparisons and hierarchically competitive ways of viewing other people, which would prevent them either from *wanting* to reach the Spanish or from being anything other than *condescending and divisive* once the Spanish were, in fact, reached.

On reflection, we can see that we ought to read Romans in relation to the one overarching purpose of missions to Spain and these three subordinate goals that connect to and support that purpose. Then, as we re-read the letter, we can also see time after time how each of these subordinate goals is repeatedly addressed in what Paul decides to write.

For example, regarding the introduction and self-defense of his message, we not only see that Paul begins his letter on a remarkably defensive note in 1:16 but that he goes to great lengths subsequently to show how his message does not implicate God in unfairness (a question of theodicy) in 2:11; 3:6; and 3:21–26, how justification by faith alone does not undermine but coheres with the importance of Abraham (ch. 4) and of proper Christian obedience (ch. 6), and how Paul has not forsaken but continues to try to reach his kindred according to the flesh (ch. 9). Romans is designed to defend Paul's gospel in a variety of ways.

Similarly, regarding internal unity, Paul not only claims that the gospel is God's power unto salvation for the Jew first and also the Greek (1:16), but he goes on to address the objections of a Jewish teacher proclaiming circumcision in 2:17–29, shows God's equal treatment of Jews and Gentiles in both sin and salvation in chapter 3, addresses the peculiar place of the Jewish people within redemptive history throughout chapters 9–11, enjoins unity of diverse parts within the one body of Christ in chapter 12, and directly addresses weak and strong in chapters 14–15.

Regarding externalism and hierarchicalism, Paul not only describes a mission to all kinds of Gentiles (1:14–15) but also addresses a variety of ways in which visible distinctions between different groups of people are not a proper basis for confidence. He shows how God's observable patience with some people's sins is not a sign of favor but only temporary in 2:1–11, how the Jew is properly defined not by flesh-

circumcision but by something hidden in the heart in 2:17–29, how Abraham was justified before he was circumcised in chapter 4, how the hope of God's people is not presently visible but will be revealed at the resurrection in chapter 8, how not all Israel according to the flesh was truly of Israel spiritually in chapter 9, and how it is neither the outward distinction of abstaining from foods nor the outward distinction of eating those same foods that accomplishes God's purposes in chapter 14. Indeed, as he says toward the very end of his argument, the kingdom of God is not in fact of eating or drinking but of the invisible, spiritual realities of righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit (14:17). Throughout the letter Paul, therefore, instills a theology of the cross that undermines externalism and all forms of this-worldly hierarchicalism.

In these and other ways, then, detail after detail of Romans makes clear that we understand its content best when we read it as an effort to transform the Roman church's relations to Paul, to each other, and to the assumptions of the dominant culture around them—and *all* of this for the sake of missions to Spain. Clearly, to become an effective part of supporting a Spanish mission, the Roman church would need to think rightly about quite a wide array of topics. In fact, it would need to be transformed by the renewing of its mind (12:2). Without sound, carefully constructed theology, the mission that Paul planned to Spain would either never start or would eventually be imperiled. Put differently, *Romans demonstrates how the missionary endeavors of the church should be motivated and guided by just the sort of deep, nuanced, precise theological understanding that this letter as a whole labors to provide.*

But why exactly is this needed? Can't the church skirt theological depth for the more practical purpose of evangelizing the lost? In truth, it cannot because, among other things, missionary efforts are something *we* engage in actively. Everything we do and how we do it is always predicated on our view of ourselves, the Lord, and others. In other words, as with the rest of life, *whether or not we do missions and how we do them is inescapably and deeply theological, so we need a full-orbed, well-crafted theological understanding to motivate and guide us in it.*

Our options, then, are to act out a theology that is insufficient, reductionistic, unnuanced, or just plain wrong and therefore not be able to have proper unity within or proper engagement of unbelievers without, or else to be more thoroughly and deeply biblical in our beliefs, seeking to have and make use of all the resources that Romans and the rest of Scripture provide in order to know how to be the church internally and properly reach out to a lost world externally as well. In other words, to serve the gospel of God correctly, our theologizing should have clarity, precision, and depth *for the sake of* a proper relationship to God himself, cordial unity in the inward functioning of the church, as well as proper outward expansion.

It is not mere coincidence, then, to observe that the single greatest missionary of the apostolic church was also one of its most significant and influential theologians. Similarly, as we reflect on our context, we can also be thankful for the tremendous theological resources and heritage we possess as Reformed believers and as members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Ours is certainly a heritage steeped in theological care. And it is not despite this but because of it that we should also be motivated and enabled to do missions, whether at home or abroad.

We can, therefore, be encouraged tonight to remember afresh the synergy—the necessary and inescapable synergy—between theology and missions. The missionary endeavor in our presbytery or elsewhere is always, among other things, a conflict of worldviews between the Christian faith in all its richness and various forms of unbelief with their counterclaims. How, then, will we navigate that conflict and precisely address what each alternative, unbelieving worldview offers if we do not have deep and carefully crafted theology ourselves? In fact, Reformed theology, more consistently than any other Christian tradition, has a detailed and all-embracing biblical worldview to offer, not least because of the long-standing impact that books like Romans, Hebrews, and many others have had on it.

This is exactly what J. Gresham Machen and others understood when they first formed the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions and later founded the OPC and its missions committees.[3] Contrary to the pragmatism of the mainline church of that time (and much modern evangelicalism today), the missionary enterprise is not a place for compromise or for watering down the distinctives of Scripture so that the unbelief encountered during missions is left partly intact or less than fully challenged, uprooted, and replaced by the all-embracing, transforming claims of Jesus Christ. Rather, missions require rich, nuanced theology.

We must also remember that missions always require significant sacrifice from the church and a willingness to love others who are outsiders or foreigners to our own experience. How will we want to do that? How will we know how and how not to do that? How will we know what is essential and what is optional? Romans shows that this is no easy, shallow task; it is one that can easily be misunderstood and in which Christians can quickly go astray. We need the depths of the theology of Romans, then, in order to be properly informed and equipped as a church for this challenging yet important task.

We must, therefore, clearly see that what the broader church often sees in competition (and what we could also be tempted to see similarly), namely theology and missions, are things we *should* see as closely, cordially intertwined and interdependent. And so we should be encouraged by the richness of the theological heritage we enjoy as Reformed Christians, drawn in no small measure from the pages of Romans itself. Yet we should also be challenged to ask ourselves afresh in every

3. It is worth noting how the movement that led to the OPC's founding in 1936 began in many respects with a controversy over missions, particularly regarding how modernist theological compromises were being tolerated or promoted on the foreign mission field in the interest of understanding and reaching people from other religious and cultural backgrounds. So then, the entire impulse that led to the OPC's founding had much to do with the relationship between theological particularism and a robust interest in and zeal for the outreach of the gospel to the lost. For more on the relation between theology and missions within the OPC's early history, see Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), especially chapters 6 and 7; Robert K. Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1987), especially chapters 6 and 7; and D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee on Christian Education and The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), especially chapters 1 and 2.

generation of the church whether *we* have indeed embraced the cordial relation between theology and missions as we should. Does a tension between theology and missions continue to exist in our midst in any measure? Is our cordial commitment to deep and nuanced theology at a high or a low ebb as individuals and as a presbytery? And what about regarding missions? It is fair to say, I think, that the Presbytery of the Midwest is known for effective outreach and expansion. Is it also equally known for its interest in theological depth? Similar questions can and should be asked by every other OPC presbytery about itself (and by other sister, Reformed denominations of themselves). Does beautifully detailed and deep theology fuel missions? And does a desire for missions sponsor careful efforts to articulate and defend beautifully detailed and deep theology, just as in Romans?

No doubt, there are many forces at work in the world around us that would seek to undermine our commitment to theological depth and precision as well as to missions. We live in a day of unparalleled distraction, technologically and otherwise. It is easy to feel we don't have time for deep theological study or engaging in theological controversy. We live in a day where people outside the church are increasingly unfamiliar with even the basics of the Christian message, making outreach and discipleship even more energy-intensive than they ever have been in recent memory. It is easy to feel weary or overwhelmed by trying to reach out beyond the walls of the church, is it not? We also live in a day of increasingly aggressive and high-profile opposition to Christian truths. Particularly in our Midwestern context, where disagreement and conflict are generally avoided, these features of life today could challenge our theological resolve as well as our resolve to engage robustly in meaningful missionary outreach.

Yet in the face of these and other challenges, may the magisterial letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans encourage us afresh to remain committed to and even relish in the essential, God-given synergy between profound, nuanced theology and God's mission to a lost and dying world. May we continue to value our rich theological heritage, as we should, and also to zealously pursue missions motivated and directed by that same theological content (and nothing less) as we also should. And may we particularly be strengthened in the gospel itself, in all the detail with which Romans and other parts of Scripture help describe and defend it. For that gospel, regarding a Savior crucified and resurrected for us, who is received by faith alone and who transforms lives with a heavenly hope, is indeed the sole power of God unto salvation for all who believe. A power that can even bring hedonistic, profligate, willful Gentiles *like ourselves* to the submission of faith, the assurance of sonship, the transformation of ethics, and the ultimate glory that awaits God's people in the future. May we be strengthened, unified, and directed by this letter, then, brothers and sisters, as we engage the great theological task and the great missionary task wedded to it, both within the boundaries of our own presbytery and throughout the whole world, unto God's glory alone. Amen.