

Exploring Romans. Part I.

Paul's letter to the Romans is his most influential work. He wrote it not to church communities which he founded, but to churches in Rome which he hoped to visit. He wrote it at a time when he was still a controversial figure. He planned to visit the churches in Rome on his way to Spain, which he never reached. It was important to him that he explain himself and his gospel and answer his critics. We are blessed with having the result in which he sets out what he preaches and why.

Paul features large in the New Testament. Luke spends much of his history of the early church in Acts writing about Paul as its main hero. There are seven of Paul's letters and in addition a number of others written by admirers in his name, altogether thirteen, in other words half the New Testament's twenty-six books. And of the rest, the Acts of the Apostles gives most of its attention to Paul.

In addition, Paul's seven letters stem from the 50's CE, just a little over two decades after Jesus, in contrast to the gospels, of which the first, Mark, was written in the early 70's. Luke, who wrote Acts in the 80's, draws on stories and anecdotes about Paul. It appears, in addition, that he sometimes accompanied Paul. In his somewhat idealised account, he portrays Paul as a hero and as generally much more harmonious with other leaders in the early church than we know from his letters that he actually was. We are fortunate to be able supplement the letters with Luke's information and sometimes correct the latter in the light of them, such as where there are differences about the number of times Paul revisited Jerusalem and about his theology.

Paul's letters were written not to be included in a permanent body of sacred writings, but in response to specific situations. This gives them a sense of immediacy. They are dealing with concrete issues. When we read them with that in mind, they come alive. In these studies we are rereading Romans in that light. As an explanation of what he preaches and why, it is more abstract than his other letters, but even then, we can detect that when he writes he has concrete criticism and concerns in mind.

I have broken the studies into 3 parts of 4 sessions each. The units follow the sequence of the letter, and are best tackled sequentially, but they are prepared in a way that each unit can also stand alone and be used independently of the others.

Part One

1. Paul: "I'm not ashamed" (Romans 1:1-17)
2. "We're all against perverts!" (Romans 1:18-32)
3. "All have sinned" – So You are Sinners, too! (Romans 2 – 3)
4. All Abraham's Children (Romans 4)

Part Two

1. Sin as more than Sins (Romans 5)
2. Baptism and New Life (Roman 6)
3. Commandments are not Enough (Romans 7)
4. Confidence in Hope (Romans 8)

Part Three

1. Israel and the Future (Romans 9 – 11)
2. Living out the Faith (Romans 12 – 13)

3. Dealing with Diversity (Romans 14 – 15:1–13)
4. Ministry and Leadership (Romans 15:14–33; 16:1–27)

Each study asks you to read a passage or passages from Romans, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Photos are his own.

Paul: “I’m not ashamed” Romans 1:1–17

“Let’s go to Spain!” That was clearly Paul’s intent, as Romans 15 later shows. We can imagine how the conversation might have proceeded ... with a colleague or with himself: “but we’ll need to drop by Rome on the way. That should be ok, though they are not congregations we founded and there have been rumblings ever since I fell out with Peter and my colleague Barnabas in Antioch. Amazing that they stopped meeting regularly with Gentiles under pressure from James’s people!”

Paul would have been thinking of the episode he recounts in Gal 2:11-14. There were sure to be some believers in Rome who were very critical of him. If he was planning to stop by, he had better be very careful in the way he introduced himself. So, he sent someone with a letter to be read to the folk there. Fortunately, it worked. They did not trash it. They kept it, which is why we have it.

It is not too difficult to see what the issues were which he needed to address. They keep coming up indirectly in the letter. Had God given up on Israel? Was Paul promoting lawlessness by declaring believers were no longer under the Law? Hadn’t Corinth exposed just how dangerous that idea was with so many going off the rails there? Was he not an upstart anyway, not an original apostle?

“I’m not going to back down on my approach. I am not ashamed of my gospel, but I will need to explain.” Thankfully, he did, and we can still benefit. Romans tingles with these anxieties and concerns. When we bear that in mind, what he says can really come alive.

So, how should he begin? The standard pattern for us is to start letters with “Dear ...” For them it was “X to Y hi!” All Paul’s letters begin that way, so here we have: “Paul ... to all God’s beloved in Rome ... grace ... and peace!” He always inserted additional information into that framework and it is usually very relevant for the subject matter of the letter. In Romans the additions in 1:1–6 are telling.



4th century image of Paul in Ephesus

In them he begins and ends with reference to his status as an apostle: “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1); “through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves” (1:5–6). He is asserting his authority but with a sense of humility. The words “servant/slave” make that clear, as does his acknowledgement that this was no power grab, but a gift and calling from Christ himself. With that he is alluding to his conversion on the road to Damascus, when he flipped from attacking the Jesus movement to joining it. He adds “including yourselves”, because that is the issue. He wants to be accepted and given space to exercise ministry also in Rome.

His sense of commission to reach out to Gentiles relates to some of the biggest controversies which dogged his ministry, such as when fundamentalist believers insisted on circumcision of males “because the Bible says so” and founded rival congregations in Galatia, not to speak of his conflicts with Peter which had a similar base.

The other main addition in his opening greeting is twofold: a reference to the prophets in the scriptures and a summary of the gospel. With this addition Paul was on common ground with the Romans, a good starting point, though some of the arguments later would be about how to interpret the Scriptures. It is possible that Paul is citing part of a summary of the gospel with which the Romans would have been familiar, perhaps taken from a mini creed with which they were familiar because it had been passed on to them. It frames Jesus as fulfilling the hope for an Anointed King in the line of David. The word for “Anointed” in Hebrew is “Messiah” and in Greek: “Christ”. Other terms used of a Davidic king were “Son of David” and “Son of God” (that is, adopted by God to act on his behalf). Thus, this mini creed mentions his descent from David and his resurrection as the event in which God appointed him the Messiah, Son of God. There was a lot missing from this brief outline of the gospel, but Paul would go on to fill it out later.

Paul mentions the Holy Spirit (“the Spirit of holiness”). Later Paul will refer again to the power of the Holy Spirit as the power to change people’s lives and so signals it here. It will return here already in 1:16–17, where he wraps up this opening section with the declaration that he is not ashamed of his gospel because it has power to transform lives, his answer to the claim that strict observance of the commandments was all that was needed.

After this bold start, Paul embarks on what was also always an element of polite letters, namely, assuring the addressees that you have heard good things about them and that you pray for them. We see that in 1:8–9. But Paul quickly moves on to affirm his desire to visit them. His prayer includes “that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.”¹¹For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you” (1:10–11). We then see some careful footwork: he back peddles: “or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (1:12). He must not sound too arrogant.

He then reasserts his longstanding desire to visit, including “in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles” (1:13). Many in Rome’s congregations would have been proselytes, that is, already Gentiles who converted to Judaism, when they became followers of Christ. There was plenty of scope for outreach in the city.

He brings this opening section to an end in a similar way to how he began, by describing himself as a servant/slave. Here he uses the image of debt. He feels he owes it to both Jew and non-Jew to share the gospel, as he understands it. He may have his back against the wall, but he is not backing down. He is sticking with the gospel he proclaims, because it brings about powerful change in people’s lives. Even here, we detect his sensitivity when he writes: “to the Jew first and also to the Greek”. No! Contrary, to his critics, he has not betrayed his Jewish heritage!

He ends on a high note: “the righteousness of God”, or, put more simply, God’s goodness. For Paul, God’s goodness and generosity welcomes people into a right relationship with God and that generates goodness in their lives. Wonderful! Not rules. Relationship! It is a bold claim, but one on which he insists on despite the fundamentalist backlash to his ministry.

Did he get to Spain? No. Did he get to Rome? Yes, but as a prisoner not as a visitor, and there the Roman authorities executed him.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?

2. What was behind Paul's worries about going to Rome?
3. In what ways do you see similar issues troubling the church today and how can we best deal with them?

“We’re all against Perverts!”

Romans 1:18–32

After his introduction Paul launches into an argument that runs from 1:18 – 3:31. In fact it begins with his bold statement in 1:16–17 and ends by repeating its main themes of God’s righteousness revealed and faith for all in 3:21–26. In a first step Paul seeks to get his hearers onside by making statements with which he knew they would agree. God hates sin and a prime example of what they saw as sin was sexual perversion.

When people have a perverted idea of God, they develop a perverted attitude towards themselves. That is the basis of sexual perversion, he argues. It shows in people’s sexual orientation being not towards those of the opposite sex, but towards their own and it shows in passions and actions which flow from that. Paul could expect his Roman hearers to agree with him because it was one of the differences which marked Jewish communities off from the depraved world in which they lived.

Paul and his fellow Jews were brought up on the basis of their science as set out in Genesis, where we read that God made humankind male and female (Gen 1:27). There can only be males and females. That seemed also obvious by looking at human bodies. They were made for each other, for multiplying. What seemed obvious was also reinforced by the prohibitions in Leviticus against men sleeping with men the way they did with women, declared an abomination (Lev 18;22; 20:13). For Paul and his fellow Jews all human beings are therefore heterosexual. That is their nature and how God made them.

Did anyone then think otherwise? Yes, they did, and there were theories explaining why some people are naturally homosexual, attracted sexually to those of their own sex. Plato, for instance, has Aristophanes, one of his characters in his work, the *Symposium*, recount the myth that once there were three human beings, male, female, and mixed (male and female). They offended the god, Zeus, who in anger cut each of them in half and ever since the male halves have been wanting to re-join, and similarly the female halves and the mixed halves. Plato opposed the idea out of concern that if such same-sex behaviour took off, the population would go into decline. It was a waste of semen.

Attitudes towards homosexual orientation and behaviour were mixed in Paul’s wider world. In the Greek world of aristocracy, mentoring young men sometimes had led to sexual relations with them. Those who approved required that it cease once the man reached marriageable age, around thirty. Many, like Plato, disapproved. In Roman society pederasty could also be tolerated, but with no time restriction, though never with a fellow citizen. Spartans saw close sexual relations among men in the army as building solidarity. Some Stoic teachers had a reputation of going too far in friendship with students. There was sexual exploitation of slaves and minors and male prostitution, even within the imperial household. The tolerance of lesbian relations was considerably lower than of relations between men, though Greek tradition preserved the erotic poems of Sappho who lived on the island of Lesbos, which gave lesbianism its name.

Paul will have none of it, as his statements make clear. Such attitudes and behaviour were dishonourable, not just by having some men act as women – women were seen as inferior – but also because it dishonoured God’s creation. It was unnatural. In his list of evildoers who will not enter the

kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 he includes reference to “male-bedders” and “softies” (a literal translation), very likely referring to active and passive partners in same-sex relations.

Like other Jews of his time, Paul applies the prohibitions in Leviticus equally to women as to men. Despite the suggestions of some that Paul does not target lesbianism in 1:26, the reference to lesbianism is much more likely. Paul also paints with a broad brush. He is attacking not just exploitation of minors, but also adult consenting same-sex relations, for he notes how they can burn with passion for each other (1:27).



Paul’s argument is also psychological, as is often the case in his work. The mind matters and he depicts minds with such orientation and passions as darkened and unfit, and actions as the fruit of such minds. In 1:28–32 he returns to a broader focus, listing all kinds of sins which result from the state of sin. Mentioning that practitioners deserve to die may still be a reference to that requirement in Leviticus about men sleeping with men, because for most of the sins mentioned capital punishment was not prescribed.

We can imagine those listening to Paul’s argument applauding his views. They were, after all, what they would have all believed. He will have won them onside. It was a good move. They were all against such people, whom they saw as perverts.

Over the course of time, it has become clear that Paul’s main assumptions about sexuality need updating, just as his likely assumptions about cosmology and the like need updating. We know the world is round and orbits the sun not the other way round and certainly not that it is flat. We now know that some people are naturally gay and for others this may indeed change over time in either direction. Our legislatures recognise this and so the validity of gay marriage. The media has brought to our attention the fact that there are and have been outstanding citizens whose natural orientation has been homosexual. Such people are themselves often the strongest arguments against anti-homosexual prejudice.

Gay men and women have suffered over the years because of such prejudice. For centuries until recent times acting out their sexuality was deemed a criminal offence. Such prejudice is kept alive by fundamentalists. There is now a new and concerning development in certain conservative Christian circles. They acknowledge the fact that some people are naturally gay. They then try to read such acknowledgement into what Paul writes, on the one hand, watering down his statements, and, on the other, then demand that such genuinely gay people never give expression to their sexuality. That is cruel. It is also potentially dangerous, since, while for some people celibacy is easy, for others it is highly problematic and can lead to their letting out their sexual urges in ways that are abusive and destructive. That kind of fundamentalism which chooses dogmatic belief over compassionate response to human need has more in common with Jesus and Paul’s opponents than with Jesus and Paul, themselves.

Paul's conclusions make sense, given his starting point. This is true also of his attitudes towards women. Generally, however, his approach was to adjust to new situations with flexibility and compassion and thereby to sow the seeds of future change. One of the reasons he was a controversial figure was because he did just that – in relation to circumcision and to fellowshiping with Gentiles. He even treats Jesus' prohibition of divorce flexibly when faced with the issue in Corinth.

For Paul, however, there was no such new knowledge which convinced him to change his basic assumption about sex. One of his contemporaries, Philo of Alexandria, knew and cited the myth of Aristophanes, but rejected it out of hand in the light of the biblical tradition of Genesis. Paul may have also known it and would very likely have been aware of such theories, but would have done the same as Philo. We do, however, have access to new knowledge and so we need to employ the same flexibility to ensure that what is most loving prevails, grace not law, and to reshape law and our attitudes accordingly.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is Paul's basis for claiming homosexuals are perverts?
3. On what basis might we approach the issue differently today?

“All have sinned” – So You are Sinners, too!

Romans 2 – 3

“Aren’t they awful! Paul’s right!” “I think he’s nailed it.” “I’m a bit surprised after all I’ve heard about Paul. Good on him!”

These are likely responses to Paul’s description of the world’s sin and especially sexual perversion. He will have won many over, even the more suspicious. But then, quite suddenly, he turns on them in 2:1. They are inexcusable when they look down their noses at others if they, too, sin. Paul is knocking them off their high horse. He’s not taking anything back of what he has said in the previous chapter, but he is challenging them to face reality and stop thinking they are somehow superior and immune from sin and its consequences.

Behind his move is the underlying tension Paul was aware of. For some people had been saying that as the apostle to the Gentiles he had gone overboard in treating them as equal to his fellow Jews. He was thereby also in danger of betraying his own people. Those listening to his letter in Rome would have included Jews but also converts to Judaism, proselytes, now embracing its new form as expressed in the Jesus movement. Converts from one religion to another can sometimes be very intense, perhaps at times because they are still inwardly conflicted about what they have done. Such Gentile converts may well have been among Paul’s harshest critics.

Some people get their sense of worth by saying what they are not. They appear to need to be able to say, “Aren’t they awful!” It can be a kind of adult form of goodies and baddies. They’re baddies; I’m a goodie! Paul’s clever rhetoric of setting them up only to take them down to reality serves to defend his belief that God treats all people equally, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. This will not be the first occasion when he has needed to mount a defence and we can imagine that he developed over time the arguments which he displays here.

His first argument is that God sees and judges people not on the basis of their claimed religious status or inheritance, but on what kind of people they are, what they have done, “according to each one’s deeds” (2:6). Actions speak louder than words. So, he declares about God’s judgement: “There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,¹⁰ but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.¹¹ For God shows no partiality” (2:9-11). In 1:16 he had used the words “the Jew first and also the Greek” to speak of hope. Here he uses it both of hope and of judgement. Being a Jew won’t make you immune from judgement. You will be first on trial! – a dramatic reversal.

His second argument goes further: non-Jews have a sense of what is right, written on their consciences, and that puts them at the same level as Jews who know the commandments. They can be equally right with God when they live by their conscience (2:12–16).

He next mounts a direct assault against the sense of privilege which he suspects plays a role among some of the Jewish believers and converts who would be listening to the letter. He lists elements which many would claim as their virtues: “instructed in the law, ... a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (2:18–20). None of those claims count if at the same time

these people are engaging, for instance, in theft, adultery, or idolatry. Being circumcised – a hot topic in the early days of the church – counts for nothing if you live a life of sin. Paul then spells it out:

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. ²⁹Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. (2:28–29).

Did Paul go too far? Some might have thought so. He may have sensed the danger, because he backs off slightly in 3:1 to acknowledge that Jews like himself do have an advantage. They have “the oracles of God”, the scriptures (3:2). The fact that they also fall into sin does not alter the fact that they are advantaged. It is also, however, absurd to suggest that somehow God is letting them down by judging them because of their sin. Paul slips in here a reference to one of the accusations launched against him, namely that by saying forgiveness is for all he is virtually saying: do what you like. You’ll always be forgiven. “And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), ‘Let us do evil so that good may come’? Their condemnation is deserved” (3:8).

Paul begins to bring his arguments to a conclusion when he writes: “What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin” (3:9). He then proceeds to quote a string of statements from the Psalms about all as sinners and underlines that they were referring to fellow Jews.

Clearly, Paul’s main concern is to defend his claim that God’s generous offer of a restored relationship is for everyone, just as much for non-Jews as for Jews. All need it. He is responding to criticism from some of his fellow Jewish Christians who think that he thereby denies Israel its place of privilege. He will have more to say about that later in the letter, especially in chapters 9 – 11. It is important not to misread Paul as being anti-Jewish here. He is dealing with Christians and then only some of them.

It is also important not to be too mathematical in treating what he has written. That would happen if we took “all have sinned” (3:23) as implying therefore that no one up to his time has been in a right relationship with God. That is clearly not his view. In Romans 4 he treats Abraham as an obvious exception. In addition, his early arguments in this section assume that not only some Jews but also some non-Jews will be judged to be right with God.

Paul’s primary aim has been to bring everyone down to the same level in order then to say that God’s forgiveness is made freely available to all without discrimination. He is defending his gospel that non-Jews can also be brought into a right relationship with God and should therefore be treated equally. This was quite different from the stance of Peter and others whom people from James persuaded that they should not have regular fellowship meals with them, as Paul reports their doing in Gal 2:11–14.



Paul's declaration of God's grace and forgiveness for all comes in 3:21–26. Like 1:16–17 with which this major section began, it speaks of God's righteousness, God's goodness and generosity being revealed or brought to light, especially through Jesus. Paul takes up some very early interpretations of Jesus' death and its impact as being like the impact of sacrifices, which people felt brought change and relief. Israel's temple sacrifices were sometimes ways of offering thanks, but also included sacrifices associated with prayers for forgiveness. Proclaiming God's forgiveness was a key element in Jesus' message and so it was not surprising that they interpreted his death in this way. It became Paul's favourite way of summarising the gospel: Christ died for us, for our sins.

For Paul, to speak of God as righteous, meant speaking of God as wanting to restore and heal broken relationships. As he puts it, "that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). "Justify" means to set into a right relationship, to set right. Later Paul will talk about God's goodness not only setting people right but also generating goodness in them.

The chapter does not end in 3:26 because what is driving Paul is his concern to counter prejudice and boasting about superiority and privilege. "Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded." Boasting, based on having or even keeping the commandments, has no place. Our confidence is not based on being better than others ("Aren't they awful!"), but on God's goodness and generous love, equally toward Gentiles as towards Jews. There is, of course, more to be said. So, Paul must add: of course, this does not mean that the law and the commandments do not matter. On the contrary, this is ultimately what they are about when you interpret scripture from its heart and recognise its witness to God's generosity.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is Paul's main concern?
3. In what ways do you think Paul's arguments might help us look at issues of faith and belonging in the wider world of many cultures today?

All Abraham's Children Romans 4

Why go on to mention Abraham? Because it was a sensitive issue. Paul's critics had correctly pointed out that when he and Peter and others set aside the requirement that male converts be circumcised, they were setting scripture aside. "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen 17:10). That included bought slaves and foreigners who joined the people. These critics had infuriated Paul, as he tells us in Galatians, by founding rival congregations in Galatia and seeking to persuade congregations founded by Paul to disown him as someone who watered down scripture. Such fundamentalism would have found its way also to Rome.



It was important, therefore, to mention Abraham, Israel's famous ancestor. Paul has his own distinctive approach. He focuses on the question: what made Abraham significant? It wasn't because he meticulously observed all the Law's commandments, the "works". It was because of his faith. Paul cites Genesis 15:6 as his evidence: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Or in other words: what showed that Abraham was right with God was the fact that he believed God and God's promise. Paul's hearers would know the context. Genesis 15 reports God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be countless, like the stars of the sky. Paul will be extending that to include Gentiles.

To mount his argument, Paul picks up where he left off in chapter 3. There, he underlined that there is no room for boasting before God or anyone else on the basis of being a meticulous observer of the commandments.

No one is going to keep them to perfection. Everyone sins. Even Abraham will have sinned. Abraham was reckoned to be right with God not because of his works and achievements and keeping commandments, but because of his faith in God's goodness and generosity. Paul then cites Psalm 32 in support. It speaks of forgiveness, a key theme in Paul's gospel. To forgive is to bring someone back into a right relationship with you. That is what God offers in the gospel and, in that sense, also what he offered Abraham when Abraham was willing to trust God.

Next, Paul points out that this declaration about Abraham being right with God happened before he was circumcised. That made him a model, argues Paul, of people who are uncircumcised also being brought into a right relationship with God, such as Gentiles. In the context of Genesis 17 circumcision was not a prerequisite, but a confirming sign that Abraham and others belonged in the covenant which God made with them. We can perhaps imagine Paul's critics responding: that's why Gentiles, too, should be circumcised! Paul disagrees.

Paul has made his point. Abraham was reckoned to be right with God because of his faith before he was circumcised and not on the basis of it and of keeping the Law. The same is now true of Gentiles. In that sense, Abraham is also the ancestor in faith of Gentiles who believe. That is enough. They do not need to go on to be circumcised and observe all the laws and commandments given to Israel.

Paul makes a further connection with Abraham's story. He mentions the promise God made to Abraham when he was anxious that he might never have children because his wife Sarah was infertile. It was an ancient legendary story with larger-than-life elements, especially about people's ages. Genesis even tells of Methuselah living to be 969 years of age (Gen 5:27)! The legendary elements here are that Abraham was allegedly around 100 ("as good as dead" 4:19) and Sarah was in her nineties – surely well past menopause! – when God promised that she would bear a child. Paul plays with the imagery of death ("as good as dead") and may well be alluding to Jesus' death and resurrection. The impossible becomes possible! Abraham believed it. God credited Abraham because of it and Isaac was born.

Paul's expresses his argument in a complicated way, but in essence his aim is clear. Far from abandoning the faith of his ancestors and disowning Abraham, he is asserting that when Gentiles come to faith in God and are restored to a right relationship with God, they, too, become part of the family of Abraham. Indeed, they share this in common with Abraham: they came into a right relationship with God without being circumcised. He truly is, therefore, also *their* father, too.

Not everyone listening to Paul's arguments will have been convinced. Genesis 15:6 may mean little more than that Abraham was credited with being righteous, that is, good, because he believed God's promise that he would be able to have children. It is something of a stretch to equate believing that promise with believing in the gospel and to equate being righteous/good with being restored into a right relationship with God. On the other hand, Paul's observation is valid that Genesis indicates that God approved of Abraham because he believed what God promised and that this happened independent of and before any other requirements.

In some ways Paul's argument is similar to what he said in Romans 2 about Gentiles also being able to be counted righteous independent of knowing let alone keeping the laws and commandments given to Israel. Paul never ceases to be a Jew and to respect and value his heritage, but he is able to abstract himself from his own culture and see matters on a broader front. In the broader scheme of things, what matters most is good relationships and good behaviour. That then matters most when he interprets and reinterprets the sacred writings which have formed him. He is not a fundamentalist, hanging on every detailed requirement.

The main thing is being in a right relationship with God, with oneself and with one's fellow human beings. He uses terms translated as "righteous" "righteousness" "justification" "just", which have over the years generated debate and confusion. In Greek they are all formed from the same stem: "dikai-". The closest English meaning is "right", hence we can speak of someone doing right, being in a right relationship, but it means more than "correct". It means also "right" in the sense of being good and, more than that: generous. So, when they spoke of God as right or righteous, they did not mean impartial and uninvolved, but rather engaged, caring, loving. Goodness, righteousness, was not about not doing bad things. It was about doing good and generous things. That included restoring, offering forgiveness, inviting people to begin again.

It was a big idea touching every area of life. God is good and therefore loving and forgiving, restoring people into a right relationship with God and with themselves, and, in turn, generating that same kind of goodness in them towards themselves and others. The basis for all this to happen is believing in love and acceptance. It is not making claims about what one deserves or seeking to justify oneself to oneself or to others or to God on the basis of merit or achievement. That can become a terrible burden and is bound for failure. Justification, that is, getting into a right relationship with God (and oneself) is a gift to be welcomed and believed. You take it on board as a gift. That is the meaning of the faith which Paul talks about.

Tragically, we can learn the ways of self-justification very early in our lives, especially when we conclude that we will only be loved if we are good, do the right things, and have good achievements. Such conditional love can then condition some people to live this way for the rest of their lives, justifying to themselves and others their worth by signalling their achievements – sometimes also learning to cheat by making themselves out to be better than what they really are. It becomes critical when they are no longer able to achieve so well because of aging or disability and so fail to keep up their facades of worthiness. The gospel, as Paul insists, can free us from such self-preoccupation by persuading us to love ourselves as God loves us. That then frees our minds to be able to think of others and think more caringly about ourselves. We have then got it “right” – with God, with others, with ourselves.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why is Paul referring to Abraham?
3. Justification by faith, self-justification – what are your personal observations about such issues today?