

Exploring Romans. Part III.

Part III of Exploring Romans deals with the final chapters of the letter, Romans 11–16. This introduction repeats much of the introductions to Part I + II as well as offering a brief recap on the material covered in them.

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.

Part I looked at Paul's overall purpose and concern in writing Romans and his strategies for winning over his audience. That included starting on common ground both in his initial greeting which signals key themes, and in his citing homosexual orientation and behaviour as a manifestation of the depravity of the wider world. We then noted how Paul switched back to his hearers reminding them that they, too, were sinners, and so had no basis for seeing themselves as superior and especially for despising Gentiles. In Romans 4 he then argues that believing Gentiles too are Abraham's children on the basis that both he and they have come to be right with God not on the basis of keeping the Law but on the basis of faith and submission to God's generosity.

Part II considered the central chapters of Romans where after Romans 4, Paul changes gear to focus on giving some explanation why his gospel does not lead to an irresponsible free for all, but, on the contrary, highlights how real behavioural change is brought about. He focuses on a change of mindset which comes about as people are freed from their guilt and fears and so are able not only to

receive God's love but also to share it. Doing so means they more than keep what the Law commanded people to be and do. His discussion therefore clarifies that the problem lies in people's mindset, not with the Law itself, which is good. It is just that with a corrupted mindset trying to keep the commandments as a way to life does not work. It rather ties people up in further guilt.

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 part can also stand alone and be used independently of the others. There are four sessions in this Part III of exploring Romans:

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>

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Session One

Israel and the Future (Romans 9 – 11)

Romans 9:1–5; 10:1–13; 11:25–32

Paul goes to some lengths to address a problem which one senses was simmering in his thoughts all along while writing this letter. He had already addressed criticism from those who suggested his failure to make the Law and commandments central to faith was dangerous and irresponsible. There was a related criticism: by suggesting that God had opened up a relationship offer to Gentiles on the same basis as Jews, wasn't he thereby dismissing God's covenant and special relationship with Israel?

We can imagine that Paul will have sought to answer this criticism before. In Romans 9 – 11 he brings together a number of his arguments. While this session will focus only on some parts of what he wrote (those listed above), the comments will seek to cover all the main points.

We sense from the way he begins, that this is not an academic discussion but a very personal issue: "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit" (9:1). He wants them to know that he really does care about Israel, his people, and he really knows about the unique position they hold. He lists their special privileges and even ends his list with a liturgical flourish: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen" (9:5).

He goes on to counter any suggestion that anything God said in that regard was not true or was inadequate. It was, he argues, simply a fact that not all descendants of Abraham were treated in the same way. The line of Israel as a people came through Isaac and then Jacob, called Israel. That, he argues, was God's choice and cites also God's words to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (9:15). By implication, they should therefore not complain if God now decides to show compassion towards Gentiles and offer them a right relationship.

To support his argument, Paul cites the prophet Hosea ("Those who were not my people I will call 'my people'" Hos 2:25; Rom 9:25) and the prophet Isaiah about God not saving all of Israel but just a remnant (Isa 10:22–23; Rom 9:27–28). He then comes back to his arguments earlier in the letter when he claims that the reason why Gentiles have become acceptable and most Jews have not, is because the latter have failed to understand that getting right with God is a matter of believing and accepting God's offer, not of keeping the Law and commandments.



He explains this further at the beginning of Romans 10, repeating his genuine concern that his fellow Jews are missing out. Their zeal for keeping the Law is misplaced. God is not asking them to do that

but simply to believe what Christ taught: righteousness before God, getting right with God, is a gift, freely offered by God. The Law does not have that role. If it once did, that has come to an end. It is not as though this is difficult, as though it is hard to gain access to Christ and his message. No big effort is required, but only faith: believing what Christ said. That is true, whether you are Jew or not. As he explains, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (10:12). In the rest of the chapter Paul makes the point that someone has to make this good news known in the world and, by implication, that is why he does what he does.

In Romans 11, he returns to the objection that he might be implying that God had rejected Israel. Not at all, he argues, pointing out that he, himself is a Jew, and that he and many others have embraced the gospel. He picks up the notion of remnant again: “At the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (11:6). In a slightly doubtful move, he suggests that God hardened the hearts of the rest. It is slightly doubtful because he does not mean God made them reject the message, for then they would bear no responsibility. Paul thus has two rather conflicting thoughts: people are responsible and somehow God must have a hand in what is happening. Historically this tension gave rise to differences between denominations, as originally between Methodists who gave more emphasis to free choice and Presbyterians who emphasised God’s influence in people’s choices.

Paul then extends this claim to suggest that it had a purpose. It resulted in the offer of a right relationship with God being extended to Gentiles. “Through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹²Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean” (11:11–12). This is a surprising twist in the argument to which he returns, but first he makes some comments to the Gentiles who would be listening to his letter.

Paul feels at this point that he needs to avoid the danger that they, in turn, start feeling superior. Using the image of a tree, he suggests that some branches were broken off from the tree, namely Jews who refused to believe the gospel. Then other branches were grafted into to it: namely Gentiles who believed. Then Jews who turn around and accept the gospel will be grafted back in again.

Paul brings his discussion to a conclusion by returning to his comment about “full inclusion”. He mounts the suggestion that one day, stimulated and challenged by the success of the mission to the Gentiles, Jews, themselves will come to believe. For Paul, that has to be the case because God cannot surely abandon Israel. “They have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:31–32).

Paul calls this claim a “mystery” (11:25). He cannot believe God gives up on people. He is not sure how it will work, but surely God does not give up. People have argued ever since about what Paul is really saying here. Is he speculating that sometime in the future in his time, all Jews will believe the gospel and become Christian? Ewe know this didn’t happen. Is he going further and saying all people will eventually come to faith? Is he saying that in the end God will not give up on Jews, whether they become Christian or not, and, indeed, will not give up on anyone?

He gives us no clear answer except the sense that he obviously has difficulty believing that God will stop loving. He believes that too much to be satisfied with the notion that God will write some people off permanently. There is not enough data to decide, but there is enough for us to recognise that believing in God as loving and caring drives his thinking even if he has to declare in the end: I don't quite know how. Let it be a mystery. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" (11:33).

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 does Paul spend so much space dealing with the issue of Israel? Where does God fit into his arguments?
3. "If God is going to write some people off in the end, then it must be ok for us to do so already in this life." – Why does it matter how we think about God? Will God ever stop loving?

Living out the Faith (Romans 12 – 13) **(Romans 12:1–13; 13:1–10)**

After Paul's long response to issues about Israel and its status, it is as though he has now taken a deep breath and changed his style. As 16:22 tells us, Tertius has been carefully writing down what Paul has been dictating. Time for a rest break!

As he starts again, Paul makes general comments applicable to the wellbeing of all. The relationship with God is paramount and so he uses the imagery of sacrifice which belongs to the worship of God in the temple. He was not the first to say that the sacrifices that matter most are not slaughtered animals, but hearts and lives committed to goodness. As the Psalmist puts it, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 51:17). Or, as Hosea puts it, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings" (Hos 6:6).

When Paul urges them not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, he is making the same point he had been making in earlier chapters. "The world" here is the sphere where sin dominates and rules. The renewing of one's mind is another way of speaking of having and cultivating a new mindset where God's Spirit and so love rules. When your mind is being renewed in this way, you will know what God wants and what love means. The right kind of attitudes and behaviour will follow. You won't have to look at keeping rules and commandments. Love will happen.

Paul has always been realistic about the fact that people need to work at renewing their minds in this way. To aid the process, he names some of the things which undermine it. One of them is ego, valuing yourself by comparing yourself with others – "I'm better than them!" Instead, Paul focuses on belonging and uses the common image of the body as a symbol of belonging. In 1 Corinthians 11 he develops the same theme by pointing out the absurdity of one part of the body saying to another, like the foot to the hand, I don't need you! We all need each other.



We all have different gifts. We are, in that sense, all parts of the one body of Christ, all with different and valued roles. There is no room in Paul's understanding for competing egos and one-upmanship.

In 12:9–21 Paul lists off more practical advice, spelling out what it means to love one another and be a community of faith. Prayer, giving financial aid, offering hospitality – all very obvious but all subject to neglect. There is to be no room for hate or revenge, including toward those who act hatefully towards us.

In chapter 13 Paul gives advice about state authorities. This may well have been an issue for people in Rome, the seat of imperial power. Was Paul being sensitive to the possibility that authorities

might get hold of his letter? Paul's view here that state authorities have divine legitimacy later inspired all kinds of claims to power and control by political authorities as well as a common passive submission to them in situations where they were far from good news. Today we see the need to call out abuse, to recognise that sin also expresses itself in oppression or in perpetuating inequality. Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God was after all an alternative vision to Rome's claims to legitimacy.

Paul's statement in 13:7 is in that sense safer: "Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due", to which we might add the words, when it really is due and appropriate. At least, Paul is urging people not to opt out but to participate in civil society.

It coheres with what Paul has been saying throughout the letter that he cites the ten commandments in order then to sum them up by saying that they really mean: "'Love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (13:10). Living by love means you more than fulfil what the Law intends.

In 13:11–14, we see that Paul, like other believers of his time, including those he is addressing at Rome, assumes that history would soon come to an end. This was an expectation among fellow Jews of the time and underlies the many movements of reform and revolt in Judea and Galilee. They included military responses, as among the insurgents, or prophetic responses, like John and Baptist and Jesus. Life was sufficiently hopeless for people to conclude that God would have to stop it and start again with a new heaven and earth. The first generations of the Jesus movement expected that on that final day Jesus would return to rescue his own and God would bring on the day judgement where people would have to face up to what they had done.

For Paul, this adds some urgency to his advice, although it stands alone in strength and value whether one believes the end of the world is nigh or not. His instruction, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires", recalls his contrast earlier in the letter between the flesh, namely the life of greed and self-indulgence, and the Spirit. Putting on Christ belongs to his notion of clothing oneself with Christ, the Spirit of Christ, as with a garment. Elsewhere he speaks of entering the body of Christ, being part of it, living within its power sphere of love. Live in the power sphere of God's being, God who loves, and this will address all the concerns about being a healthy and holy person.

The expectations of the first generations of believers about the end of the world and the return of Christ proved to be mistaken. We carry on after 2000 years! The movement did not collapse when the climax failed to come, primarily because its focus was not speculation about an event, but a person, the person of God. Living in oneness with God makes sense of life now and is the basis of hope for the future and enables us to trust in that hope. It enables us not to need to know what we cannot know, namely the shape of the future in this life or beyond. Being loved and loving in oneness with God is more than enough.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. "Faith is just between me and God" – do you think Paul would agree?
3. How do you work out what it means to be a person of faith in our world? In what ways do you find Paul's comments helpful or otherwise?

Dealing with Diversity (Romans 14 – 15:1–13)

How are we to cope? Some are vegetarian. Some eat meat. Some keep sacred days. Some don't. Paul has heard, or imagines, what it must be like being in one of the house churches in Rome. Some, like Paul, see all such things as just scruples. Others see them as part and parcel of their faith. How can such people possibly get on with each other?

Paul pleads for tolerance and sensitivity. It is ok for people to have different views. Learn to live with each other and respect differences. Don't be judgemental! Look to where your basic loyalty should lie: it is with Christ, with God, not a loyalty to such scruples.

Paul calls those adhering to such restrictions "weak in faith". Would they have liked being called weak? He does not do so to look down on them or judge them, but rather to appeal to the so-called strong to care about them.

Paul is upfront about his own views: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). The fundamentalists among those listening to his letter might have immediately responded: "Paul, you are setting aside what the Bible says" and they would be right. The Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible make it very clear that some foods are unclean, especially some meat. Those choosing to be vegetarian were making sure they ate no unclean meat by not eating meat at all.

These issues surface not infrequently in the early Jesus movement. They were behind the conflict between Paul and Peter which he reports in Gal 2:11–14, about whether sharing regular meals with Gentiles was acceptable. Mark cites Jesus' words on the issue, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (7:14–15) and reads them as absolute, declaring that Jesus was thereby "declaring all foods clean" (7:19). Matthew and Luke revise Mark's radical stance along the lines that Jesus says: it is not so much what enters but what exits that defiles and delete Mark's comments about Jesus thereby declaring all foods clean.

Paul sees matters very differently from those "weak in faith". He declares: "The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17). Nevertheless, he warns the "strong" that they need to be sensitive and if need be, abstain for the sake of not causing offence and division in the community. People need to act with integrity, he argues, and not act contrary to their conscience.

Try to live in harmony. That is a higher priority. That may mean you need in some circumstances to limit your freedom and not just please yourself. Christ is the supreme example. So he writes: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:6). He then connects this to God's priorities, which are to embrace both Jews and Gentiles. It was their coming together that generated some of these problems.

Paul's plea for sensitivity and perspective was probably very helpful as these diverse believers came together. They didn't have to go off and form different denominations: the meat eaters church, the non-meat eaters church, the day-observing church, the non-day-observing church!



Seeing beyond such differences is essential if we are to uphold the unity of the church and bring various denominations to embrace one another, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, Orthodox.

That is the basis of ecumenism, that we are all one in Christ. The Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians even gave up their separate identities to become the United Church in Australia mirroring similar developments in India and North America.

Paul's advice about abstention for the sake of unity is not always appropriate. Mrs Patterson, brought up in the staunch belief that women should be veiled, wear hats, in church, insisted that all other women in her church do the same. It was what the Bible commands. She was right: it is what Paul advised in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. It upset her and spoiled her worship when they didn't, she argued. She was not successful. How does one decide?

John Dow mows his lawn most Sundays after getting home from church despite Andrew, his neighbour and fellow church member, calling it an offence to his faith. Just where do you draw the line? Does the men's fellowship include wine at its meals? Andrew was quite happy with that. Can a church exist with different attitudes towards sexuality or is that a big enough issue to split? What about other matters like having women ministers (long since resolved for some but not Catholics) and accepting divorce as an option for some?

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 does Paul see as the basis of unity?
3. "Minorities can hold the church ransom by insisting we give in to their demands" – Are there situations where such sensitivity is to be deemed appropriate? Are there some, where it is not? Who should decide and how?

Session Four

Ministry and Leadership (Romans 15:14–33; 16:1–27)

In these sections Paul is bringing his letter to a close. As he had done in Romans 1, so he returns here to a matter of sensitivity. He must not come through as pushy, so he acknowledges that those listening to his letter are “full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another” (15:14). Perhaps he is exaggerating, but he wants to be sensitive, so he goes on: “Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder” (15:15). He is reminding them of what they know (or should know!).

Paul then reasserts his basis for doing so. He has a commission, which he calls a “grace” or gift, from God, the term he also used in the letter’s opening (through whom we received grace and apostleship: 1:5). That commission was for him “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (15:16). That is the basis on which he mounted his arguments and challenges, and he is proud of what he has achieved in ministry, “from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum” (15:19). His sensitivity continues to show as he has been strict with himself about not invading other people’s patches. Rome is not his patch, so this assurance is important.

It is consistent with these comments that Paul then indicates that his visit to Rome is primarily about using it as a staging post for his going to proclaim the gospel in Spain. In the meantime, he indicates, he has another task: the collection of financial support for the believers in Judea (who have been faced with famine). He calls the collection “ministry to the saints”. Ministry is also about money and he sees it as appropriate (indeed as an obligation) that the Gentiles make a contribution to their Jewish colleagues in the Jewish homeland.

This was not going to be straightforward because believers (judged by Paul to be “unbelievers”!) in Jerusalem may refuse to accept his ministry, namely this offering from the Gentiles. It is noteworthy here that Paul describes the monetary collection as ministry. There is also more to this than meets the eye. Traditional Jewish expectation was that at the end of time Gentiles would come to Jerusalem and worship God, beating their swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks (e.g. Isa 2:2–4). Paul apparently sees the bringing of this offering to Jerusalem as fulfilling this hope. Why might it not be accepted? Because Paul was a controversial figure and was offside with James and Peter.



The Colosseum, Rome, site of later executions

What actually happened? We do not know for sure, except that Luke’s account in Acts suggests that it was not straightforward. He records that Jerusalem leaders met him with the statement: “You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. ²¹They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (Acts 21:20–21) – allegedly false, but actually true!

A large part of the sum was used to pay off a requirement demanded of some who wanted to be released from a vow (Acts 21:23–24). Paul was subsequently arrested (Acts 21:33). That was the end of his hopes to preach the gospel in Spain and drop by Rome on the way. Instead, he was transported to Rome as a prisoner. He was not to know that this would be his fate when writing Romans, nor were those who would listen to his letter. Both he and Peter were executed seven years later in Rome by Emperor Nero in 64 CE.

The final chapter of Romans contains many greetings. Some are quite revealing, such as the reference to “Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae”, who was to visit the Roman churches. Paul goes on to mention other women in ministry, including Prisca (16:3), Junia, “prominent among the apostles” (16:7), and Tryphaena and Tryphosa (16:12).

In 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 Paul reiterates what had become a norm, namely that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church”. There would have been pressure on women to conform to the customs of the day, also in their attire, but this was far from absolute, as the evidence in Romans 16 shows. There were significant exceptions. This had also been the case in Judaism generally where we find women prophets and charismatic leaders like Judith, not to speak of Queen Salome Alexandra. The pressure of male dominance eventually suppressed women’s equal participation in ministry with negative consequences right through to the present day.

Unsurprisingly, Paul has many people to greet and from whom to send greetings. The Roman army had made travel by land and sea safe and many travelled. Paul has firm words to say about people causing division, whether fairly or not. There must have been people bent on flattery and smooth talk then, just as there are now.

His concluding acclamation, a standard part of a formal letter, again highlights the outreach to Gentiles and the call to the “obedience of faith”, an expression with which he had begun the letter in 1:5. This kind of obedience is to believe in love and follow the consequences, whoever you are, Jew or Gentile.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. “Paul was human after all” – how does it show?
3. What is your experience of inclusion and exclusion based on people’s religious and cultural assumptions?