

# The Purpose of the Epistle to the Romans

**Ross M. Woods**

Worldwide University,  
*ross.woods1954@gmail.com*

## *Abstract*

The background to this research is the variety of historical views regarding Paul's purpose in writing the Epistle to the Romans. Of the many suggestions, some of the most prominent have been the ideas of Romans as a treatise on soteriology, and as instruction to resolve quarrels in the church.

The objective of the research was to propose a coherent concept of Paul's purpose in writing. The method of inquiry is primarily documentary analysis, specifically as an overview of the whole, and a consideration of other commentaries in the literature review.

The conclusion is that Paul set out to address three main topics on the Jew-Gentile distinction: circumcision, the role of Jewish Law, and the Jewish heritage as God's chosen people. It is also suggested that the letter to some extent reflects Paul's personal history but also relates to its pastoral application in a church comprising members with radically contrasting religious backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Romans Paul, Epistle, Purpose, Jew, Gentile

## **Abstrak**

Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah beragamnya pandangan mengenai tujuan Paulus dalam penulisan Surat Roma. Dari sekian banyak kemungkinan, yang paling utama adalah pendapat bahwa Surat Roma sebagai risalah tentang soteriologi, dan sebagai petunjuk untuk menyelesaikan pertengkaran di dalam gereja.

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengusulkan konsep yang koheren tentang tujuan Paulus. Metode penyelidikan terutama adalah analisis dokumenter, khususnya sebagai gambaran keseluruhan, dan pertimbangan komentar lain dalam tinjauan pustaka.

Kesimpulannya adalah bahwa Paulus berujuan untuk membahas tiga topik utama tentang perbedaan Yahudi-bukan Yahudi: sunat, peran Hukum Yahudi, dan warisan Yahudi sebagai umat pilihan Allah. Ada juga kemungkinan bahwa surat Roma mencerminkan sejarah pribadi Paulus, tetapi juga berhubungan dengan penerapan pastoralnya di sebuah gereja yang terdiri dari anggota-anggota dengan latar belakang agama yang sangat berbeda.

**Kata-kata kunci:** Surat Roma, Paul, Tujuan, Yahudi, Bukan Yahudi

## **PENDAHULUAN**

The purpose of the Epistle to the Romans was to provide a specific explanation of the Jew-Gentile distinction, even though it was expressed in various ways. Romans chapters 1-11 may be interpreted as response to questions about the Jew-Gentile relationships in the church at Rome. Paul opens the letter with a summary of his thesis, “salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile ...” (1:16,17) In his long closing section, Paul again picks up the theme that the gospel is for the Gentiles (15:7–13).

Paul's comments appear to be mainly preventative because he usually does not mention the recipients' inadequacies, nor does he mention a quarrel.

The core analytical question is, “What was the question that Paul set out to answer in writing the Epistle to the Romans?” The answer to this question was his purpose in writing, and leads to another question that requires a little more conjecture, “What need in the Roman church is the letter intended to address?”

It is helpful to distinguish between Paul's main reason for writing and the solutions he proposed. We argue that his dominant reason for writing was to clarify the Jew-Gentile distinction. In his solutions, he consistently promoted a common salvation through Christ.

## **METHOD**

The method of inquiry is primarily documentary analysis, specifically as an overview of the whole, and a consideration of other commentaries in the literature review. It does not require detailed exegesis.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **What is “purpose”?**

Several aspects of “purpose” are not necessarily the same. The first aspect of purpose is the range of Paul's specific motivations for writing. These circumstances included the upcoming visit, the proposed trip to Spain, and the many friends and acquaintances in Rome.

The second is the specific factors that precipitated the writing. In the case of Romans, various circumstances were quite favourable to sending a letter, but it is not clear that they were the trigger that caused Paul to write; the text itself does not identify any of these as the precipitant. It is possible that a combination of factors prompted Paul to write, so it would be a mistake to suggest that there could only be one precipitating factor.

The third is the matters actually discussed in the letter. As noted by Cranfield, the expositor's task is “to keep our eyes on the course Paul actually followed and to try with proper seriousness to understand what he has actually said in the order which he said it.” (Cranfield, 1979, 2:819)

### **The “treatise on soteriology” view**

Many commentators have traditionally suggested that Paul's purpose in writing Romans was to present a general treatise on salvation to a church that Paul had not yet visited or a general compendium of Christian doctrine (cf. Stott, 1994, pp. 31f). In this view, the Jew-Gentile contrast is merely an element and rather easily ignored.

For example, Cranfield proposed that Paul presented “a serious and orderly summary of the gospel as he had come to understand it.” (Cranfield, 1979, 2:81.) In his overview of the theology of the letter, he does not at all deny the role of the Old Testament, but presents a predominantly New Testament concept of theology. (Cranfield, 1979, 2:823-870.) Calvin's overview also suggests the view of a compendium of theology. (Calvin, 1948, pp. xxix-xxxvii.)

In the New Testament world, several factors support that view, all suggesting that the Jew-Gentile distinction was intrinsic to the general understanding of Christianity in the first century church. Put another way, a “treatise on soteriology” could not avoid the Jewish question. The Jew-Gentile contrast was significant in Paul’s personal view of salvation, where he had to rebuild his theology. He had come from a Jewish background but had a dramatic conversion. He accepted a Jewish Messiah but took the role of a missionary to the Gentiles. He needed to justify a view that a Jewish religion could offer salvation to Gentiles. Similarly, many churches in Paul’s time were heterogeneous Jew-Gentile churches. The Jew-Gentile contrast was likely a constant source of potential misunderstanding among members, and, like Paul, finding a resolution was essential to being a Christian during that era.

Next, Paul’s statements are almost without exception generalisations, and the teaching chapters do not mention any particular events or characteristics of the church in Rome. In particular, the section in 1:18-32 is a general harmatology. Paul had not yet been to Rome at the time of writing, and it was presumed that he could not have addressed specific problems there.

### **Weaknesses of the treatise view**

Although Paul had not yet visited Rome, the number of friends and co-ministers listed in chapters fifteen and sixteen indicate that people had moved back and forth between Rome and the churches to which Paul had personally ministered. It is most likely that Paul was well informed of the challenges faced by the Roman church and that they were familiar with his teachings.

Despite the lack of mention of any particular events at the church in Rome, the contents rather clearly indicate a topic of discussion. The reasons for their nature as generalisations seem to be the solution to the particular problem, that is, the nature of salvation that Jewish and Gentile Christians share in common. (Stott, 1994, p. 35.)

Third, the notion that Romans is a general treatise on salvation makes little sense. It is tantamount to saying that it has no particular purpose; it would be a personal reflection rather than a letter addressed to a particular church for a particular reason. Cranfield argues that the theological and practical content of the letter should not be seen as a “paranthetic insertion” in the letter. (Cranfield, 1979, p. 816.)

Fourth, Paul already knew many of the Christians in Rome (chapters 15, 16), so it is unlikely that he had to introduce his theology.

A variant of this Christian viewpoint is distinctly Protestant, the so-called Lutheran view of Romans. For example, modern Christians easily forget that the Greek word “Christ” is Paul’s translation of “Messiah” and rarely treat circumcision and the Torah as aspects in defining current Christian faith. It is easy to look at Paul’s view of a common salvation in Christ and sideline the Jewish questions. It is easy to emphasize salvation through faith and omit the question of circumcision. It is easy to emphasize grace and dismiss the question of the Jewish law. It is also easy to overlook the Jewish Law and discuss only the problem of legalism.

More recently, the exegesis of Romans has moved from a Lutheran position to a position that saw Paul as a Jew and was more sympathetic to the Jewish identity and concerns of the early Christians. Alan F. Segal pointed out that “Jews besides Paul in the first century were asking questions about whether and how Gentiles not under the law could be saved.” (Lancaster, 2015, p. 5. See also Segal, 1986, pp. 105-114.)

### **Literature review**

Greib (2002) collected eight reasons why Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, some of them repeating the discussion above. They are fairly typical of the wider literature, and range from undeniably true, to peripheral, to rather improbable.

The first is that Paul wanted to introduce himself and his theology (p. 14). This is fairly unlikely as the personal greetings indicate that he had worked very closely with some of them and it is very unlikely that his views needed explanation.

The second is to correct false impressions about Paul's teaching (p. 14). This is based on the assumption that the Roman Christians had misunderstood his teachings based on the message of Galatians. For the above reason this is unlikely, and Greib correctly points out that the angry tone of Galatians is quite different from the tactful and supportive tone of Romans.

The third is to reassure Jewish Christians of God's covenant with Israel (pp. 14f). This is undeniable as Paul gives so much of the book specifically to this topic. The fourth is in similar vein, and is equally undeniable for the same reasons. Paul wanted to reassure Gentile Christians that they were included in God's covenant promises (p. 15).

The fifth is to urge the church in Rome to cease quarrels over non-essential matters and promote unity (p. 15). The letter makes little mention of quarrels and those few mentions tend to be more like warnings against quarrels than confronting any particular dispute. (Rm 14:1-7, 13, 15:1, 16: 17-19.) However, the emphasis on unity is clear.

The sixth is to recommend Phoebe, who seems to have delivered the letter (p. 15). This is probably true, but it has a very minor role, being only two verses (Rm. 16:1,2).

The seventh and eighth reasons were to build the Roman house churches into a base for his mission to Spain and in so doing to proclaim the gospel to them (p. 16). Although he clearly mentions a plan to go to Spain, it is hardly a point of emphasis in the whole letter.

Matera's view was that the church in Rome was a series of house-churches comprised of two parties who were possibly in disagreement. On one side were the converts from Judaism and Law-following Gentiles, and on the other side, Gentile believers who did not follow the Jewish Law. (2010, p. 8.)

Matera reviews four purposes, which he suggests as unlikely. The first view is that it is to give a summary of the gospel, which was the majority view in the past, because it is a systematic exposition of sin and salvation. The second was to rehearse a speech for his upcoming visit. The third was to give an introduction in view of a forthcoming trip to Spain. The fourth was to dispel tensions between Gentile Christians who had the ascendancy over Jewish Christians who had recently returned after expulsion. Matera goes on to suggest that Paul had multiple reasons for writing. (2010, p. 9f.; cf. also Stott, 1994, pp. 32f.)

Hendrickson suggests that a dominant reason for the letter was a desire for fellowship with the Roman Christians, and Paul's main reason for its argumentative style was to equip the readers for apologetic and evangelism in a community where they were vastly outnumbered. (Hendrickson, 1980, pp. 24f.)

Keck also offers an interpretation of the situation in the Roman church.

... for Paul, the quarrels were a symptom of a deeper problem—the attitude of Christian Gentiles toward Jews, especially non-Christian Jews. Evidently the Jews widespread refusal of the gospel prompted some Gentile believers to conclude that their salvation through Christ was quite apart from the Jewish people. (Keck, 2005, p. 31.)

However, as pointed out above, the letter does not indicate quarrels. Moreover, it is probably unfair to say talk of the "Jews widespread refusal of the gospel" because many first-century Christians were Jewish.

Campbell draws a more accurate picture. The term "division" seems more measured, while the use of the word "dispute" seems to have the same improbability as the word "quarrel".

A division had apparently arisen because the liberal-minded Gentile Christian majority ... were unwilling to have fellowship with the conservative Jewish

Christian minority ... In the letter, which is primarily addressed to the former, since they were chiefly to blame for the dispute, Paul undertakes an exposition of the righteous purpose of God both for Jew and Gentile. (Campbell, 1992, p. 21.)

Whether Gentiles were the majority and Jews were in the minority is a separate topic. Although the difference between the two groups is a consistent theme, the Roman letter does not directly mention a dispute in the sense of quarrel. Campbell goes on to use the more measured word “disunity” (p. 22) The letter does little to lay blame but much more to promote unity in a common salvation, that is “righteous purpose of God both for Jew and Gentile.”

In that sense, it seems to be addressed to both Jews and Gentiles. At least some parts of the letter are addressed primarily to Gentile believers (see 1:5-6, 13; 11:13; 16:26), but the text also seems to indicate that some readers were Jewish (2:17; 4:1; 14:2,5,20-21). (Johnson, 1997, p. 5.)

Holland interprets the tensions in the Roman church as “threatening to split the young church.” One of the specific issues was that Jews treated Gentiles as second-class citizens. (Holland, 2011. p. 16.) The opposite to Campbell, Holland sees the Jews as the source of tension. In fact, the tension seems to be mutual rather than one-sided. Cobb and Lull present a more reasoned view:

The central issue Paul addressed was “salvation.” This issue, however, was as much social as theological. The social dimension has to do, not with the relation of Jews and Gentiles as a whole, but with the relation of Jewish and Gentile converts to the Gospel. The question was whether these groups could live together as equals in an undivided and inclusive community, or at least a closely knit network of diverse communities. (Cobb and Lull, 2005, p. 7.)

The debate seems to resonate a wider theme. How is the Old covenant fulfilled in the New? In essence, it is the same as the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Some solutions give primacy to the Old Testament while others are centered on the New Testament. (Baker, 2010, chaps 3, 5.)

### **The three kinds of questions that Paul set out to answer**

Paul addresses three main topics on the Jew-Gentile distinction:

- Is circumcision necessary for salvation?
  - He concludes that salvation comes by faith, not by circumcision.
- Does the Jewish Law lead to salvation? Isn't it holy? What is its purpose? Was it a mistake? Is it now abrogated?
  - He conceptualizes the role of Law as the way in which sin is defined, not as the means of providing salvation.
- What about the Jewish heritage as God's chosen people? Doesn't being Jewish lead to salvation? Can Gentiles receive the same salvation as Jews?
  - The Old Testament teaches Gentile salvation.
  - Paul notes that the Jews were rebellious and disobedient.

Although the text is inconclusive, the discussion of dietary opinion and certain days might also relate to the Jewish law. It could also relate to the question of whether Gentile Christians may eat food offered to idols. (Cf. 1 Cor. 8)

Paul's solution to the Jew-Gentile contrast was consistently that salvation is now open to both Jew and Gentile. Several sections of the letter expound a common salvation

for all believers on an equal footing. The outline of the teaching chapters indicate this dominant theme. A detailed exposition of each chapter has already been done very well many times and is unnecessary here.

Paul mentions the topic early in chapter 1:26, 17. Salvation for all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles.

1:18–2:10 The section on sinfulness expounds sin and punishment as a universal human problem, again for the Jews and also the Gentiles (1:18–2:11, esp. 2:10).

2:17–2:29 The section on keeping and breaking the Law, mentioning circumcision as a sideline, concludes that true circumcision is not physical but spiritual.

3:1–8 The value and advantage of the Jewish heritage is that God entrusted His message first to the Jews.

3:9–20 Paul returns to the theme of sin being universal; the Law exposes sin but does not offer salvation.

3:21–31. Salvation is by faith, both for Jews and for Gentiles.

4 Salvation is by faith, not by circumcision. That is, the offer of salvation is for all who believe, not just the circumcised. It is presumed that Gentiles were not circumcised and had no need of it if they had faith in “Jesus our Lord.”

5:1–6:23 This discussion of salvation applies equally to all believers.

7:1–6. Christians are free from the Law.

8 This discussion of salvation applies equally to all believers. It touches on a Law of the Spirit as a replacement for the old Law (v. 4).

9–10:4 The Jews are God’s people, but He also called Gentiles and not all Jews would be saved. The Law did not save the Jews, but Gentiles would be saved by faith.

10:5–21 There is no no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Salvation is open to the Gentiles and Israel has a history of being “disobedient and rebellious.”

11 This complex section compares the spiritual heritage of the Jews with that of Gentiles. It retains the Jewish spiritual heritage, while keeping open the offer of salvation to Gentiles.

12, 13 This is usually treated at the section on practical Christian living, including many aspects of Christian unity.

14:1– 15:6 Do not let opinions on diet and certain days create divisions.

15:7–13 The gospel is for the Gentiles.

### **The need it addressed**

The next question is: “What need is the letter intended to address?” The letter to the Romans does not address specific errors and problems like many other Pauline letters, such as Galatians with its Judaizers. It contains no rebukes or corrections for any specific errors or problems.

The tone seems to be explanatory. As stated above, the mixed-race church in Rome could have been unsure of its beliefs on the Jew-Gentile contrast and continually faced potential misunderstanding, but it was not in conflict or in danger of a particular heresy. It needed definitive teaching on this particular theme, not rebuke. In this case, the letter appears to be a gentle and expansive explanation on several related topics in order to encourage unity.

### **Two questions arising**

The first question arising is the extent to which it reflects Paul’s personal history. When Paul became a Christian, he had to resolve a series of personal paradoxes, answer some fundamental questions, and re-think his personal faith:

1. He believed the Old Testament, but preached a New Testament. With a religious background as a pious Jew, how could he maintain his conviction of the truth of the Old Testament? Had he been wrong all these years? Had the entire Jewish establishment misunderstood the old covenant?
2. He became an apostle to the Gentiles and offered them a Jewish Messiah. How could a Jewish Messiah become a Gentile savior?
3. Is the Law true and good? If so, what does it mean?
4. He believed that salvation was the inheritance of the Jews, but is now intended for the Gentiles. What then of the Jews' spiritual heritage? This leads to the problem: Had God always intended salvation for the Gentiles?

The second question pertains to its pastoral usage. The ancient church seems to have faced some related pastoral issues:

1. How can we maintain unity in a group with such radically contrasting religious backgrounds?
2. To what extent do we have to follow the Mosaic Law?
3. Should we maintain Jewish food practices?
4. Should new converts and baby boys be circumcised?
5. Is Jewish descent a guarantee of salvation?
6. Do Jewish Christians have a heritage that makes them naturally more spiritual than Gentile Christians?

## CONCLUSION

The letter to the Romans was a specific response to the Jew-Gentile distinction in the ancient church. The first section contained an examination of the once common view that it was intended to be a general theological treatise. The next section looked at the outline of Romans. The final section conjectured any pastoral relevance.

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