

# Commentary on Romans

from

A “Different Perspective”

Charles Gourgey, Ph.D.

© 2009/2018 Charles Gourney  
*All Rights Reserved*

# Commentary on Romans from “A Different Perspective”

## Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	1
BRIEF CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	7
ROMANS 1 .....	9
ROMANS 2 .....	13
ROMANS 3 .....	18
ROMANS 4 .....	21
ROMANS 5 .....	26
ROMANS 6 .....	30
ROMANS 7 .....	34
ROMANS 8 .....	40
ROMANS 9-11 .....	47
ROMANS 12-16 .....	57
CONCLUSION .....	64
The Old Perspective .....	64
The New Perspective .....	68
A Different Perspective .....	81



# Commentary on Romans from “A Different Perspective”

## Introduction

Paul’s Letter to the Romans appears first in the biblical order of his letters, but it is one of the latest and certainly the most complex. Even today there is still no scholarly consensus on what Paul actually meant. This letter has been the subject of many great and lengthy commentaries far exceeding the scope of this very short one. Yet this one is different, and I believe worth presenting.

It is admittedly presumptuous for someone like me, who is not a Bible scholar, to offer a commentary on this letter, but this commentary has an unusual history, which I will soon explain.

I see the Letter to the Romans comprising three major sections:

- Part 1: The faith of the covenant community (chapters 1-8)
- Part 2: The membership of the covenant community (chapters 9-11)
- Part 3: The life of the covenant community (chapters 12-16)

As scholars have pointed out, all three are important and part of an organic whole. Some differ, however, on the relative weight each section deserves. The traditional view (called by some the “Old Perspective”), associated primarily with Martin Luther and subsequent reformers, places great emphasis on Part 1 and claims Paul demonstrates that salvation is through “faith alone” (*sola fide*) and not through “works.” Scholars of the “New Perspective,” a modern approach, believe that the magnificent language of Part 1 has overshadowed the greater significance of Part 2, and they wish to correct that. Krister Stendahl states that Part 2, dealing explicitly with Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, is “the real center of gravity in Romans” and that Part 1 is merely a “preface” (Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* [Fortress, 1976], pp. 28, 29). N. T. Wright, another New Perspective scholar whom we shall visit later, also emphasizes the mission to the Gentiles as this letter’s overriding concern.

While I agree about treating the entire letter as one complete whole, for me its heart has always been the first eight chapters, which tell us exactly what the faith is by which we are presumed to be “justified” and that serves as the basis for Paul’s inclusive mission to the Gentiles described in Part 2. I was always more interested in the content of this faith than in the history of its propagation. I tried for years to understand what those first eight chapters meant and how Paul arrived at the faith he describes.

One night in 1996 I was unable to sleep because words kept pouring through my head. I spent the entire night writing those words down. I had no choice; there was no other way I was going to get any rest. The words turned out to be a commentary on the first eight chapters of Romans. And they gave me answers to questions I had been asking for years about the faith of which Paul speaks, what it is, and how it heals us.

I have kept the message of this commentary with me over the years, but hadn’t thought of setting it down in a form to be read by others. Now I feel it may be the time.

Why? Because I have been exploring Paul in the work of established Bible scholars, trying to understand through their knowledge and expertise the meaning of Paul’s writings. And the more I read, the more confused I became. I discovered the “Old Perspective” on Paul, the traditional Protestant understanding according to which the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us simply by our believing in him, and only by such faith are we saved. I discovered the “New Perspective,” according to which Paul was not really concerned with the spiritual struggle of the individual believer but rather with winning the Gentile world for Christ.

I found both perspectives unsatisfying: the “old” (but still dominant) one leading to an intolerant faith that challenges moral sensibility as well as the notion of a God who loves all people equally, and the “new” one minimizing Paul’s spiritual concerns. I felt that neither of these two “perspectives” could be right, or that if one of them were right, then Paul couldn’t be right. In neither of these two perspectives could I find the Paul who drew me so strongly that I lost an entire night of sleep captured by his words.

As a result of all this study I began to lose sight of what first attracted me to Paul. The “Old Perspectivists” seemed to want to convince me that only one kind of narrowly defined faith will save people from their deserved destruction by a wrathful God. The “New Perspectivists”

seemed to want me to disregard what appears plainly obvious when reading the text itself: that Paul really is addressing the struggle for faith that those who are not born to faith must go through. With all this running through my head, I found myself unable to retrieve the Paul who once inspired me. And so I returned to this commentary, which I recorded thirteen years before the present writing, to renew my relationship with Paul and refresh my understanding of the faith he expounded. Had I not received it then, the message it contains most probably would have become lost to me.

I suspect I am not alone in my confusion. It has been two millennia since Paul lived and wrote, yet today books are still published with titles like “What Paul Meant” and “What Saint Paul Really Said.” People who are far more learned than I still sharply disagree, not just about details but about the actual substance of Paul’s message. This leads me to two possible conclusions: First, Paul was not a very good writer, or at least not a clear one. Second, what Paul himself consciously intended may be unrecoverable. And it also may not matter. The finished product may well be different and much greater than the author’s original concept.

There is biblical support for the first conclusion, ostensibly from no less an authority than Peter himself: “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16). If even Peter (or the author of Peter) had trouble understanding Paul, our own difficulty should not reflect badly on us. But just who are the “ignorant and unstable”? Given the obscurity of Paul’s writing, there may be no way to tell.

So what criterion shall we use to detect the inspiration of the Spirit in the writings of Paul? Writing may be considered inspired if it is consistent with the Gospel message of non-self-interested love (on the latter, see my book *Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith*). I believe there is a way of reading Romans that reveals such inspiration. Is it what Paul originally and consciously intended? Possibly. I have no access to Paul’s mind or to his heart. But for me that is not the most important question. The following example will explain why.

I happen to love Gregorian chant, and consider it among the greatest musical and spiritual creations of all time. Its sound and spirit put me in a contemplative mood and make me feel close to God. The other night I was listening to some responsories for Easter and feeling greatly at peace. But when I glanced at the English translation of the Latin text I found phrases like these: “It became dark when the Jews

crucified Jesus.” “Let the Jews now explain how the soldiers guarding the tomb lost the King.”

There are certainly historical inaccuracies here. Jews did not crucify anyone; crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. And *some* Jewish *leaders* may have colluded with the Romans to hand Jesus over for death, but not “the Jews” as a people, many of whom accepted Jesus while he lived (the Gospels tell us that “crowds” of people followed him). As I read the text, I wondered how Christians could recite prayers like these on a regular basis and not feel hatred for Jews. Well, many of them couldn’t recite those phrases dispassionately and still can’t. Indeed, such prayers cannot be considered apart from the long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish violence.

At the same time, the music isn’t any less beautiful for knowing that. There are flaws in the tradition from which the music comes; there is a dark side. Yet the music transcends it; it expresses something greater than its tradition with all its light and its darkness, something that may even lie far beyond the consciousness of the one who chants the words and the one who first set them to music. To throw the music out because of imperfections in the text would be to deny the spiritual reality accessible through the experience as a whole.

*The creation may transcend the creator.* It may carry truth and wisdom of which the creator is not aware. Often when we study the biography of a great author or composer, we find personal flaws that seem to fall far short of the magnificence of the creation. We might conclude that the person is a hypocrite or a phony, but that would not be fair. A truly inspired creation comes, at least in part, from a place beyond the author’s own consciousness. The very best inspired works tap into the eternal and make it visible or audible in time. To be sure, strata of the author’s limited human thinking may still be present, alongside moments of transcendence. Discerning the difference is a formidable and sometimes even impossible challenge. Nevertheless, it is always helpful to remember that the creation is greater than its creator; the work is greater than the worker.

So while I am not qualified to say to what extent Paul had the following interpretations in mind, I believe these layers of meaning are present in the words themselves. Perhaps Paul intended it or something like it, or perhaps it was the intention of the angel who guided Paul’s hand. All I can say is that only through the interpretation that follows has Paul’s great letter come to make sense to me. Did I say Paul was not a good writer? If the following commentary’s assessment of Paul’s writing comes even a little close to identifying Paul’s intention, then Paul was



indeed a great writer who authored a timeless classic of spiritual transformation. That is what Paul's words have come to mean for me.

I expect some will take issue with what follows on theological or exegetical grounds. I can only say that in the process of working with Romans and writing down this commentary I encountered insights in Paul's text that I could not have discovered without it, that they have come to make a major difference in my life, and that I hope they may benefit others also. The commentary on the first eight chapters in particular may be used as devotional material, and has helped me in this way as well. For me this is the living Paul, bearing life not found in the rigid interpretations of outworn theologies or the often-dry renderings of strict textual criticism. If this is not what Paul consciously intended, then the only conclusion I can draw is that Paul was greater than he himself knew.

In the following pages you will find the commentary on the first eight chapters exactly as I received it in 1996, with additional comments placed in brackets.\* I don't even feel that I wrote this part myself but rather that it was given to me. This is the heart of the project. It is followed by some newly written comments on Parts 2 and 3 of Romans, whose purpose is to present the entire spiritual context of the letter and to work out some prickly problems (such as, is Romans 9-11 really anti-Jewish?). The presentation ends with a discussion of the commentary in the context of contemporary scholarship, outlining what I've called a "Different Perspective."

The work as a whole has provided me with much needed clarity on this frustratingly complex book of the Bible. I hope the reader will find it in some measure rewarding as well.

*(Written in 2009)*

---

\* Bracketed notes with no date are from 2009. Notes added later are marked 2018.



# Brief Chapter Summary

## Romans 1-8

Following is a very brief summary of the significance of each of the first eight chapters (the chapters whose commentary I received). A more detailed exposition follows.

### Romans 1

Evil is real. It also serves a function: the destructiveness of evil ironically demonstrates the reality of God. By experiencing the destructiveness of evil we discover that it is wrong, and this turns us to God. This is why God seems not to intervene: this process of unfolding awareness must be allowed to take place.

### Romans 2

The law indicates what is good, but it does not change human nature. It does not keep people from turning to evil. Knowing what is right does not mean doing what is right. To do what is right, to become “righteous,” we require a transformation of the heart. This may come to us through Christ.

### Romans 3

Knowledge of sin comes through the law, which tells us what is good. All fall short of the ideal of goodness, and are under the power of sin. We all require redemption through a power greater than ourselves. In this Jesus was a model, for he died maintaining his innocence in a corrupt environment. This was a radical demonstration of faith. The same faith that saved Jesus saves us also, and makes us righteous (“justifies” us).

### Romans 4

Abraham too was an example for us. His faith, not simply the fact that he did good things, was the source of his goodness. We need the same faith, but since we are not as strong as he was, we need help in

attaining it. This help comes through the Christ event, as we witness Jesus's faith in the face of destruction, and his overcoming even of death.

#### Romans 5

We gain access to faith through the Christ event. Through faith our sufferings are transformed into blessings; they shape us, change us, and form our character. This gives us hope, which is fulfilled in God's coming to meet us through God's Spirit. God reaches out to us even in our lack of faith. Sin corrupts us and brings us close to death, but God's love working through faith counteracts the power of sin.

#### Romans 6

We may have to pay a price for our redemption. We take a stand with Christ, and like him, side with the good. This makes us vulnerable to the attack of sin, which seeks to destroy the good. But if we hold fast to our faith, then like Christ we too shall be delivered from destruction. The horrors of death are overcome in the triumph of our destiny.

#### Romans 7

We still go through an inner struggle. When we receive the law, we know that the law stands for what is good, but our natural impulses resist the good. I am at odds with myself, since something within me opposes what I know is right. This is the impulse to sin. Through our own strength alone, we are powerless against it.

#### Romans 8

There is a way out of this impasse. It is to be overcome and overwhelmed by the power of the Christ event. The Christ represents God's love reaching out to human beings. This divine love is a new law and new motivation, replacing the law of the sinful impulses that dwell within the human being. We must recognize the working of the Christ and dwell on it; then we become permeated by its power. We become ready to receive God's spirit, which is already reaching out to us.

Human life is nevertheless a struggle. We face challenges and sufferings every day. This must be; the Creator has arranged it this way, so that out of the futility of human existence we can discover the hope that comes only through faith. We are therefore not left alone to our own devices; the spirit resonates deeply within us even when we are totally at a loss in prayer. God, who has brought us this far, will lead us the rest of the way. With our hearts changed, as we seek God in earnest, nothing in all creation can stand against us.

# Romans 1

*(Note: The translation used in this commentary is the New Revised Standard Version.)*

***Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1:1-4)***

The resurrection is pivotal in establishing Jesus's status as son of God.

***For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. (1:18)***

The self-destructiveness of evil. The "wrath of God" is the unintended destructive consequences of all evil.

***For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. (1:19)***

"What can be known about God is plain": our first evidence that God exists is the very fact that evil is destructive. This is how we first know it. If evil did not destroy, God would remain invisible. (This is a subtle point, which is found also in Isaiah: the fact that evil has destructive consequences *identifies* it as foreign to goodness, which is God's essence. In particular, the *self*-destructiveness of evil is seen as the work of the good vindicating itself.)

***Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse. (1:20)***

The divine order is self-evident. We know that good enriches and that evil destroys. So we have no excuse for indulging in evil (cf. *re'eh* [Deuteronomy 11:26-28]).

***For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. (1:21)***

We did not act on the knowledge of God available to us, but allowed our darkness to take over, obliterating our consciousness.

***Claiming to be wise, they became fools; (1:22)***

The human perspective is distorted. We are not only ignorant, unconscious, but we are arrogant in our unconsciousness. We close the door to the spirit.

***and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (1:23)***

Idolatrous images replace the image of the true God. What we are really concerned about, what we really care about, are things of our own creation. Again, we make God's intervention in our lives all but impossible. (And then we complain, "Where is God?")

***Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, (1:24)***

Thus God allows us to indulge ourselves, does not intervene, does not prevent us, allows us to degrade ourselves. God is there, but does not intrude. We work out our own path.

***because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (1:25)***

The essence of idolatry. We ignore the creator; are interested only in self-gratification. Our material existence is all there is. This basic belief is the foundation of evil.

***For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse***

***for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:26-27)***

Our passions become deflected. Instead of thirsting after righteousness and truth, our thirst is to stamp out our consciousness by indulging every desire. The “shameless acts” are sexual acting out devoid of love, experimentation for the sake of it, leaving the soul behind, leaving consciousness behind.

[This passage is controversial and disturbing to those who are sensitive to the rights of gay people. Trying to parse Paul’s words to make him sound like he wasn’t really talking about homosexuality is fruitless. We need to understand that Paul was a man of his times, that he had no concept of sexual orientation or sexual identity nor knowledge of modern science, and we cannot expect him to have adopted a modern perspective. Paul’s purpose here is not to condemn people for who they are, but to highlight the dangers of passion overcoming judgment. Paul seizes on promiscuous sexual activity as an example because he had just mentioned serving false gods and such behavior was often associated with pagan worship. (2018)]

***And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. (1:28)***

The non-acknowledgment of God is a hypnotic state, unawareness. This is the root of evil. A debased *mind*. God allows this debased mind to play itself out, to reveal its evil results: *for only in this way could God be shown to be God*. If not, then our unawareness and extreme self-interest would be self-validating. *This – not “freedom” – is why God refrains from intervention*. [The debased, or unaware mind leads one to suffering, which reveals the error and leads to the discovery of God.]

***They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (1:29-31)***

Every *specific* evil results from this debasement of our mind, our consciousness, the instrument we are given through which to know God.

All the specifics come from this central cause. Through the infiltration of radical self-interest (“sin came in”), our consciousness becomes obliterated, and we fall into a *self-perpetuating cycle of sin*. [Unawareness leads to egotism, which leads to sin, which leads to self-destruction, which leads to the revelation of God through the identification of error as error.]

***They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die — yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (1:32)***

Yet on some level we do know that wrong is wrong – but we give in to our self-interest, to our impulses, anyway. But when we have fallen into a “debased mind,” we do not care. It makes no difference to us – we become indifferent to the dictates of conscience, to the voice of our better nature, to the voice of our fellow human beings, to the voice of God. “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” – the debased mind – the unconscious soul – is cut off from God, because it is cut off from its own awareness. We know that what we do is wrong, but we do not care.

This is how evil begins and perpetuates itself. By allowing the free reign of impulse, our mind is degraded, and before we know it, we are “slaves of sin.” *We do not even know that this process has taken place.* The *only* way we can know is through the destructive and self-destructive consequences of sin. *This* is why God cannot intervene. (We may not like it, but theodicies should not be designed for our comfort.)



# Romans 2

***Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (2:1-3)***

Whoever you are – this is not for Jew or gentile only. Since evil results from a constricted awareness, we ourselves fail to see the degree to which we are enslaved to it.

***Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (2:4)***

We *do not* immediately experience the consequences of our evil impulses. Retribution is not always swift. The window of time – the opportunity for enjoyment – the “silent” period – has a purpose. It is meant to allow us time to repent, to find our way back to God. It is kindness on God's part.

***But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (2:5)***

The heart is hard when it is closed to awareness of what is beyond our personal existence. The forces of impulse exert pressure against this awareness. But there are inevitable consequences – the divine order of the universe is not obliterated by God's kindness in allowing us time between the deed and the consequence. The order – or law – of the universe is unbreakable.

***For he will repay according to each one's deeds: (2:6)***

This is also called karma.

**to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (2:7-8)**

Here it is: to be *self-seeking* is to obey wickedness rather than the truth. It is the self-interested impulse that remains unquestioned, that leads us inexorably into evil. It is built into human existence.

**There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek. (2:9)**

The Jew first – because the Jew has been given the law. But the non-Jew is no more free than the Jew from the demands of the divine order.

**But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. (2:10-12)**

Having received the law does not change human nature. The divine order always prevails. If we have not received the law – the verbal embodiment of conscience – the divine order still catches up with us. And if we have received it – as a Jew or through exposure to the legacy of the Jew – then we are judged by it even as we violate it. Unquestioned personal self-interest will lead us to evil – and thus to punishment – whether or not we have received instruction about the consequences of evil.

**For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them... (2:13-15)**

The *heart* can always respond. The law helps direct the heart, but it is through the heart – the internalization and valuing of the law's ideals – that one is changed.

[Verses 6-8 and 13 emphasize that our actions do affect our relationship with God, and so cannot be reconciled with the “Old Perspective” (Augustine/Calvin/Luther) according to which our “works” don’t count. (2018)]

***...on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (2:16)***

And this brings us subject to *the Christ*: the light of the world that has come to illuminate the work of the heart and that gives us an entrance to the heart when the law itself gives us no power over our actions.

[“Christ” literally means “anointed,” the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah.” But when applied to Jesus it has come to mean much more: the “light of the world,” the “bread of life,” “God with us,” the angelic presence, the agent of salvation (Isaiah 52:7). It is faith overcoming negativity. Some contemporary scholars believe we should consistently translate the word “Christ” literally as “Messiah,” but that would lose much of the meaning that *the Christ* has come to symbolize. Thus “Christ” without an article refers to Jesus in his role as prophet and Messiah. “The Christ,” with the definite article, points to the larger meaning just indicated. This distinction will become critical in everything that follows.]

The Christ shows us what, precisely through the limitations of our vision due to our self-interest, we cannot see. The Christ shows us the world beyond the self, and touches the heart to enable a response to it.

***But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? (2:17-21)***

Having received the written law can actually lull us into a false sense of confidence; herein lies its danger. *Knowing* what is right does not mean *doing* what is right. Just as before, our self-interested impulses exert pressure against doing the good. These impulses affect us on a

deeper level than the “old written code,” which does not penetrate to them.

***You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, 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. (2:22-29)***

It is a matter of the *heart*. It is an inward transformation that allows one freedom from automatic obedience to self-interested impulses (which [freedom] comes only from the Christ). This transformation may not be visible to others, especially others who have not experienced it themselves, but *it always elicits a response from God*.

# Romans 3

***Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, "So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging." But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? (3:1-6)***

Human injustice confirms the goodness of the law, by demonstrating the vital need for it. But God does not permit injustice simply to demonstrate the goodness of God's word – for if God were unjust, God would be disqualified as a judge.

***But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 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!***

***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, as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one." "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of vipers is under their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."***

***Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. (3:7-19)***

The law plays no games: it stands for an ideal under which our frailties and sins are exposed, and we have no defense.

***For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (3:20)***

The ideal of the law, through its inherent goodness, exposes our sinfulness by contrast. Thus “through the law comes knowledge of sin”: sin is experienced as sinful only in contrast to some idea of what is good. Thus deeds prescribed by the law cannot make us righteous, since we are constantly falling short of the prescription, as the psalm just quoted describes. (This is clearly the sense of Psalm 143:2, upon which this verse is based.)

***But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, (3:21)***

The law therefore reveals the ideal of righteousness, but does not lead us to it. It is thus not ultimate in itself, but points toward a higher truth, as also do the prophets.

***the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (3:22)***

This higher truth is the righteousness that comes about through faith in Christ.

***For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (3:22-23)***

Again, we have all sinned and require the salvation of a power greater than ourselves. The law is not a power; it is only a measuring stick demonstrating our failure.

***they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (3:24)***

There is still a way out, freedom from the condemnation of our sinfulness. This is the grace – i.e., the gift initiated by God – of redemption through the Christ as manifest in the man Jesus.

***whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; (3:25)***

Jesus died maintaining his innocence in a corrupt environment. His faith – his conviction of God's presence – enabled him to remain innocent and resist being corrupted by the world around him (even if only through hate). *Thus his death was a sacrifice* – had Jesus given in to temptation, he would already have lost his goodness; there would have been nothing left to sacrifice.

“In his forbearance he passed over:” as we have already seen in chapter 1, God must allow evil to work itself out in order to reveal the nature of goodness. But this was not enough. So goodness itself had to be sacrificed at the altar of corruption, to effect the most radical demonstration of all.

[“Atoning sacrifice”: Greek ἱλαστήριον originally meant that which restores our closeness to God. The same word is used in Hebrews 9:5 to refer to the “mercy seat” (translation of the Hebrew כַּפֹּרֶת in Christian Bibles), the golden covering of the Ark of the Covenant in the sanctuary, serving as a symbolic space for the presence of God. The Hebrew for sacrifice, זָבַח also literally means that which brings us close to God. The radical sacrifice of goodness was needed to show how high a price we pay for sin, and finally that goodness cannot be destroyed. (2018)]

***it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (3:26)***

Jesus’s power was his faith, which remained with him because of his innocence. This applies also to us: (cf. alternate reading): *who have the faith of Jesus*. [In 1996 I knew nothing about the different “perspectives” on Paul or the controversy about *pistis christou*; but “faith of” is certainly an acceptable rendering and perhaps even a preferable one.]

***Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For***

***we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (3:27-28)***

*Justification by faith:* we are pulled out of the condemnation of our sinfulness not by trying to do the law, but by the same faith that saved Jesus (the faith that, through his innocence, which reflected the image of God, God's presence would not forsake him).

***Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (3:29-31)***

God is universal, and God's message, though originally carried through the Jews, is universal. And Jew and gentile will be saved for the same reason: on account of the faith that each possesses, the "same faith." [In this way the demands of the law are upheld: possessed by this faith, we know we are sustained by God's presence and held by God's love, and so the impulses – greed and fear – that lead us away from the law's ethical standards are naturally overcome.]



# Romans 4

***What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (4:1-3)***

Abraham's *faith* was the source of his goodness. [It is not the act that one performs, but the spirit in which one performs it, that demonstrates one's goodness. (Example: a philanthropist who gives to get his name on a building is not "justified," i.e. made righteous, by the supposedly generous act.) Also note while reading what follows: Abraham's goodness was his own and not attributed to him through the merit of another. (2018)]

***Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. (4:4-5)***

Not simply the performance of an action, but a *transformation of the heart* is required ("trust"). [Here "trusts" (πιστεύοντι) is the verb form of πίστις, "faith." It is the one who is "in faith" who is made righteous or "justified." (2018)]

***So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are***

***not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. (4:6-15)***

If one could become righteous through an external effort of the will, leaving the heart untouched, then faith would be valueless and meaningless. But the law itself – or efforts to conform to its ideals – does not make one righteous, but only condemns because it exposes our human shortcomings and failures to live up to it. *Without faith, we have nothing to counter the pressures of our self-centered impulses* (the “law of my mind”). These impulses come from a place deep within us. So does faith.

***For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) — in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (4:16-17)***

Righteousness based on faith *makes the covenant universal*. People who have not received the law cannot obey it, but all can turn to God in faith.

***Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (4:18-21)***

Abraham's faith gave him courage, perseverance, and even physical strength.

***Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (4:22-25)***

We too need the faith that Abraham had. But we need help in obtaining it, since we are not as gifted as he was. Our help is through Christ Jesus: we can see the Christ manifest in him, see his innocence (he was handed over for *our* trespasses), and witness his resurrection, which is the continued activity of the Christ even after the physical death of Jesus.



# Romans 5

***Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (5:1)***

We travel the route of faith, rather than vain attempts at self-improvement without inner transformation. This is the basis of our justification.

***through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. (5:2)***

Our own route to faith is through the Christ event: this is what gives us “access” (see on 4:23-25). Since our own resources are lacking, we need this access. Through participation in the resurrection – the continued experience of the Christ after the death of Jesus – we too hope to share in the glory of God.

***And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (5:3-4)***

Once we have reached this point, *we are liberated from bondage to our sufferings* – (including our resentment at having suffered them). Sufferings become no longer a curse but a blessing, since through our perseverance they strengthen us, transform our character, and thus give us hope.

***and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (5:5)***

This hope is not vain – it is fulfilled because there is something that comes to meet us (the Holy Spirit) [cf. Tillich, “Spiritual Presence”] that brings us witness of God's unfailing love. (In other words, we become co-participants in the experience of the Christ.)

***For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person***

**someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (5:6-8)**

“While we were still sinners” – i.e., *without faith*, since faith is the source of righteousness. God therefore reached out to us when we could not reach out to God. God sent us an individual, Jesus, in whom the transformation of faith was most complete, and who was therefore most transparent to the Christ, the emanation of divine love. He was its clearest demonstration. (Note carefully: God had sent us also every other divinely inspired prophet. This time, the type of prophet that Jesus was is what was needed most.)

**Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (5:9)**

We were justified by Jesus’s “blood” since his death was necessary for us to witness the continued working of the Christ even in spite of death [cf. John 16:7]. Our need for faith was so great that this extreme a demonstration of faith became necessary. [It is faith that transforms us and conforms us to God’s will, and mature faith could be fully realized only in the absence of the physical Jesus.]

**For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (5:10-11)**

It was through Jesus’s sacrifice that we came to witness the power of the Christ, and so this is the basis of our claim to faith.

**Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned — (5:12)**

As we experience it, death represents the power of sin. It is *destruction*, which is the trademark of sin. It is decay, abandonment, dissolution. It came “through one man” – i.e., it is part of our human nature. It is an inescapable aspect of being human.

**sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. (5:13)**

Sin always was, but was in a sense “invisible” before the law came to contrast sin with the ideal of goodness. Before the dawning of that awareness, sin was the inevitable way things were.

***Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. (5:14)***

The power of sin acting through death enveloped everyone, those whose sins were extreme as well as those whose sins were light. All were under the power of sin working through the condemnation of death.

***But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. (5:15)***

But just as sin acting through death is inescapably part of human nature, so also is liberation from sin through the grace of God inevitably part of our legacy, brought immediately to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

***And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. (5:16)***

The gift of grace through faith reverses the destructive direction of the power of sin. It brings us back from the decay of our limited condition, to conscious union with the divine.

[“The free gift... brings justification,” Greek: δικαίωμα, “just action,” “righteousness.” (2018)]

***If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (5:17)***

Thus we gain power over sin, which is reflected in the essential goodness (“justification”) of our lives.

**Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (5:18-19)**

The Christ event is the answer and solution to the fall of humanity (which was described in detail in chapter 1: the “debased mind.”)

[“Many will be *made righteous*”: Greek δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται. The Greek δίκαιος (“just,” “upright,” “righteous”) is etymologically related to δικαίωσις (“justification”). The distinction often made in this context between “justification” and “sanctification” is artificial. “Justification” in the Pauline sense means *being made just or righteous*, not just having righteousness “imputed.” If it seems otherwise, it is because in English the verb “justify” and the adjective “righteous” are two different words. In Greek they are virtually the same word, and a better translation of “justification,” if it existed in English, would be “being righteoused” (or “made upright”). Cf. James 2:14: faith without works is futile. The end of the journey Paul describes must be a real change, not an “imputed” one. (2018)]

**But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (5:20)**

The law, with its ideal of goodness, only highlighted the extent of human decay. (In addition, it “increased” the trespass through temptation of the human being to rebellion.)

**so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (5:21)**

As the power of sin is manifest in death, so the power of grace is manifest in “justification” = “righteousness” = essential goodness, that which we become capable of through the inner transformation wrought by faith. This “justification,” or transformation into essential goodness, leads to eternal life: the conscious victory over the power of sin through death, just as the Christ works consciously even after the death of the one who bore it. It is [literally] “through Jesus Christ our Lord” since Jesus, or the Christ event, was our entrance (“access”) to faith.



[In Lutheran terms (“Old Perspective”), “justification by faith” can be understood as “being declared righteous even though still a sinner, through the imputed righteousness and sacrifice of Christ.” According to the present perspective, a better rendering would be: “being made righteous through an inner transformation resulting from awareness of eternity.” (2018)]



# Romans 6

***What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (6:1-3)***

When we cast our lot with Christ, we open ourselves to the same danger that he faced: that the good is always attacked by evil. But if we are grasped by the power of the Christ, we can hardly do otherwise. And in another sense, the light of the Christ kills the desire for sin within us.

[Just as Christ willingly embraced his suffering, we must be willing to embrace our own (Matthew 10:38, Luke 14:27). (2018)]

***Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (6:4)***

By taking a stand with the good, which only the power of the Christ working within us allows us to do, we suffer whenever goodness is attacked. This is our “crucifixion,” the pain we share with Christ (Jesus). But the power of goodness does not yield, and carries us also to new life.

***For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (6:5)***

We are united in the death of Christ when we take upon ourselves the pain and destruction that evil inflicts upon the good. If we become willing to face this pain, we become ready and worthy to inherit the new life conferred through the power of the Christ.

[“A death like his”: Jesus willingly embraced the cross in faith that redemption would come. We too embrace the cross and abide with Christ, and do not fight reality. (2018)]

***We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (6:6)***

This is meant literally: by casting our lot with Christ, we are lifted out of sin. This does not mean we are incapable of sin, but only that righteousness is within our grasp – the inevitably errant lower human nature (the “stupid human thing”) no longer has total control over us. So while we may fall back into the temptation of sin, we have a way out: a light that draws us out of sinfulness and restores us to our better nature.

***For whoever has died is freed from sin. (6:7)***

In being with Christ, the human impulse dies (loses its power). This death frees us from (the inexorable power of) sin. [We subordinate our will to God’s will, and so find freedom. (2018)]

***But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (6:8)***

If we take the stand for goodness that Christ represents, then even when it is attacked we have *hope* of avoiding destruction, of prevailing, of seeing our destiny realized. [We also participate in the eternal life that Christ proclaimed, regardless of what happens to our bodies.]

***We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (6:9)***

The resurrection represents the final victory of the power of goodness over evil. That is the root of our faith. Goodness, because of its inherent power through its very nature, cannot be ultimately conquered.

***The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (6:10)***

The presence of the Christ wipes out the tendency to sin. We then live for the sake of God, as witnesses to God’s presence.

***So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (6:11)***

This new life is not for Jesus only, but for all of us who would follow him as well. We are all capable of opening ourselves to the power of the Christ.

***Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought***

***from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (6:12-14)***

[Being “under grace” rather than “under law” does not mean we can discard the law and ignore its standards, as if we were a law unto ourselves. Rather, it means that through the transformation of our hearts in faith by the power of the Christ, our natural inclination will be to fulfill what the law requires instead of being drawn irresistibly by the human impulses of greed and fear.]

[Grace, χάρις represents beneficence, divine favor, or free gift. It is akin to the Hebrew אֱהָבָה “steadfast love.” Being “under grace” means that our life’s direction is now determined by the guiding nature of God’s love, rather than just our whims and poor choices. (2018)]

***What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (6:15-16)***

It is a question of which power we choose to define our lives. We can remain a slave to our passions, or open ourselves to the light of the Christ, which balances them. Sin leads to the decay and despair of death. Obedience, true righteousness, leads to confidence even in the face of death, through the intimation of eternal life, which is an attribute of the power of goodness.

***But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, (6:17)***

Obedient *from the heart*. We can be transformed *from within*, to be taken out of the despair of sin's destructiveness.

***and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (6:18)***

Freedom from sin is not license to do whatever we want. It comes from serving another master, one whose power is greater than the power of sin.

***I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as***

**slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. (6:19)**

We can choose to direct our efforts toward righteousness and away from sin. We can “present ourselves”: God through the Christ will have to do the rest.

**When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. (6:20)**

Living subject to our sinful impulses, we had the freedom to disregard the authority represented by the law.

**So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. (6:21)**

We gained nothing from that freedom but a heightened consciousness of death, destruction, decay, and hopelessness.

**But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (6:22-23)**

Choosing allegiance to God through the power of the Christ, we become liberated from the horror of death. We have hope and confidence in a higher destiny.

# Romans 7

***Do you not know, brothers and sisters — for I am speaking to those who know the law — that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress. In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. (7:1-5)***

The “sinful passions” are the human impulses that resist our desire to do good. Being “in the flesh” means acting from human motivations only, without the Christ. In this state, the strictures of the law only stimulate our further resistance (like Adam, Eve, and the fruit that became tempting once it was forbidden). Living in this way, we have no defenses against the inexorable processes of decay and death.

***But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. (7:6)***

To be “discharged from the law” means that the dictates of the law are no longer necessary to make us righteous. The *ideals* of the law are just as valid – but they cannot be attained by brute force, and they *are* accessible through the power of the Christ. “That which held us captive” is *not* the law, but our “sinful passions.”

***What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” (7:7)***

Thus we cannot say that the law is bad or invalid. The ideals that it upholds will always be valid – it is just that knowledge of the law in itself will not make these ideals attainable. The law governs not only our actions but our impulses, our “passions.” The law forbids coveting, or lust. To know that this is forbidden but to be unable to stop it only sets me against myself. I battle against myself, while my lust only grows stronger.

***But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. (7:8)***

The more forbidden, the more tempting. Trying to stop my coveting, it's all I ever think about. Without the law's prohibition I would still covet, but I would not recognize it as wrong, and so I would not be conscious of sin. I would also not be as concerned about it. It would seem far less important, and so would occupy a much smaller place in my soul.

***I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (7:9-10)***

Like Adam and Eve before they were commanded, I was in blissful ignorance of the law's demands and of my own shortcomings. When I became conscious of right and wrong, I also became aware of my own inability to perfect myself. The result is a sense of futility and self-condemnation.

***For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. (7:11)***

The deception was [the belief that] that through knowledge of the good alone I could become good. The law, by focusing my attention on good and evil, only gave me an increased consciousness of sin.

***So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. (7:12)***

But the law itself is still good, and the ideals it upholds are good. We cannot do without the law.

***Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and***



***through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (7:13)***

The law itself then is not the problem, and it is not the law that has brought me a sense of decay and death. Rather, it is my own sinful impulses working within me, which only used the law to call attention to themselves and thus to become even greater. But this was necessary “that sin might be shown to be sin”: in order for humanity to progress we need to have this consciousness of good and evil; without it there can be no receptivity to the Christ. (See note at end of Romans 1.)

***For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. (7:14)***

The law comes from a good place, from the spiritual. But it is not effective in transforming me because I am not spiritual, or at least not completely so: my human (carnal) nature resists the law at every turn. I am a slave to the power of my sinful nature.

***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (7:15)***

I am at odds with myself, and this inner conflict is a result of having received the law. Because before having the law, I would not have recognized evil in order to resist it. But now, even recognizing evil, I still cannot resist it. So while I no longer side with my evil impulses, I condemn myself for still following their dictates.

***Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. (7:16)***

Since I do not like what I do when I sin, I agree that the law is just and right.

***But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (7:17)***

In fact, since I myself disagree and disavow what I do when I sin, because I possess the consciousness of good and evil that the law bestows, it is then not that conscious “I” that sins – far from it. It is those sinful impulses within me, whose values I reject but whose power I cannot resist.

***For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. (7:18)***

The human nature is inherently sinful. It resists the good, even when recognizing it as good. Conscious will does not prevail against it.

***For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (7:19)***

The inner split: I can side with the good, and will myself to do it, but my human nature defeats me. The law therefore does not provide a way out of sin; it only defines the problem.

***Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (7:20)***

Cf. v. 17: it is my sinful human nature, not my conscious will, that transgresses: but still, I cannot stop it.

***So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. (7:21)***

Sin therefore has its own law: you try to oppose it, and it reasserts itself even more strongly.

***For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, (7:22)***

In my heart, I know that God's law is good and I revere it as good. By no means do I reject the law.

***but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (7:23)***

But sin has its own law that opposes the law of God (cf. on 4:15). This law is stronger than my conscious will.

***Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (7:24)***

I thus become bound to my frail human nature, which includes my physical frailty and consciousness of death. There seems to be no way out of this. The more I realize my human desires, the more I see that in the long run I am condemned to destruction; they will not save me from

sickness, infirmity, and the grave. I cannot accept this death sentence. There has to be a way out.

***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. (7:25)***

There is a way out through consciousness of the Christ. Still, in my present condition, I worship the law of God with all my conscious intention, while through my human nature I am unable to realize the goodness of these intentions.



# Romans 8

***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (8:1)***

There is a way out of the inevitable condemnation – i.e., decay and death – of being creatures of the flesh. It is to be *in* Christ. It is to be permeated with the Christ-light, to be enveloped within it. This confers hope beyond the grave – a hope arising from the power of goodness itself.

***For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. (8:2)***

The Christ bears within itself a new law, which counters the law “of sin and death” – which is *not* the law of God, the written law, or the Torah. The “law of sin and death” is the binding of the human condition to inevitable sinfulness, destruction, decay, and death. While the law of God is good, this existential “law” is neither good nor evil; it is the way things are.

***For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, (8:3)***

God's own Son is *the Christ itself*. It is *not* Jesus [the man]. The “likeness of sinful flesh” in whom the Son was sent – that is Jesus. Sin was “condemned in the flesh” in that Jesus demonstrated that even as a human being, one still can have access to righteousness – not through one's own desire or will, but through the power of the Spirit.

[One way to describe the Christ is as *the angelic presence of pure love*. This comes directly from God; it is not part of the human personality. It is God's nature as human beings are able to discern it. Jesus was so open to God that he became a receptacle for this presence. The love that shone through him, and that he taught us to emulate, was divine. Those who were exposed to it experienced themselves as healed. We can also feel held by it as we meditate on Jesus's encounters with others. To be *in Christ* means to be infused with the consciousness and power of this love.]

[This Christology is more fully developed in my article “Jesus and the Christ Angel,” available at [www.judeochristianity.org](http://www.judeochristianity.org). “Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” is a way of saying that God’s presence through the Holy Spirit (or “Christ Angel”) was made manifest in the person of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus made it accessible to us, in a way we too can internalize and allow ourselves to be transformed by it. (2018)]

***so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. (8:4-5)***

This is how we become permeated with the Christ: we set our minds on it, we allow ourselves to be taken by its power, which is the power of goodness itself. Without the Christ, with only our own human nature active, we remain subject to futility. Our minds and intentions are focused on our desires. But through the power of the Christ, our attention changes, toward what the Spirit reveals to us.

***To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (8:6)***

To remain determined by our human inclinations keeps us bound to the consciousness of death, but when we are focused on the Spirit – i.e., on that love which brings us beyond the limitations of self – we discover new life and peace. Dedicating ourselves to the good, we are sheltered by the power of the good.

[The *flesh* is the symbol of our natural impulses, especially our needs and desires. Preoccupation with these desires brings us frustration and heartache. But we have an alternative: we can bring the mind to an awareness of pure love, most clearly expressed by the presence of that love in Jesus as the Christ. His free and complete reception of that love made it tangible to those who were exposed to him, including us today who know of this love through a spiritual rather than direct experience of Christ’s actual presence. The endeavor to bring ourselves into this presence is called *prayer*. We can prayerfully reflect on the examples of the love Jesus showed until their power begins to hold us and change us. In Paul’s terms in the verses that follow, this means allowing the work of the Spirit.]

[The “things of the flesh” are that which is temporal, material, and perishable. These may include material goods and possessions, status

symbols, pleasurable physical sensations, or anything that does not last. There are also unpleasant “things of the flesh” to whose focus we may seem driven: holding grudges, prejudices against groups other than our own, the desire for revenge, indignation at personal slights. But the “things of the spirit” are eternal and imperishable (Matthew 6:19-21), such as any expression of true compassion, loving appreciation of another, a deep meeting of two souls, forgiveness when required, or a sensing of the present of God’s Spirit. To dwell in the former brings misery, while to dwell in the latter brings liberation, joy, and peace. (2018)]

***For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (8:7-8)***

The mind set on human [i.e. self-oriented (2018)] desires cannot obey the law; it is wrapped up in itself, and therefore resists the divine. It has no power to do otherwise, as seen in the previous chapter. Therefore, such a one is excluded from divine favor. [That is, it cannot experience God’s love.]

***But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (8:9)***

But we need not fear, because we are not bound by the destiny of the flesh as long as we are open to the work of the Spirit. The Spirit of God then dwells in us and transforms us, but without it, we cannot know God.

[Grasping Christ as the angelic presence of divine love takes us to the awareness of the eternal. And that is the essence of faith: *the awareness of the power of eternity.* (2018)]

***But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (8:10-13)***

It remains true that if we return to the dictates of our sinful impulses, we return also to the consciousness of sin and death and its ensuing despair. But we can allow the Spirit to counter the working of these impulses, and thus always return to a sense of new life.

[Paul is not preaching against the physical body, but showing an alternative to being controlled by self-centered impulses. Receiving the Spirit that was in Christ Jesus may revitalize the body as well. (2018)]

***For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. (8:14)***

For all who so allow the Spirit to change them have an immanent sense of God's guiding love.

***For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" (8:15)***

We are not inescapably bound to the sinful nature that has corrupted us in the past; it is in fact our true destiny to rise from it to the direction of the Spirit. Then we feel ourselves to be children of the divine. When we call out to God,

***it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (8:16)***

we no longer feel that God does not hear us, but we feel the Christ within resonating to our prayer and assuring us that God has not let us slip past the scope of divine direction.

***and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (8:17)***

And feeling so connected to God, we also find ourselves inheritors: inheritors of the specific destiny lovingly prepared for us. But to realize this treasure, we must be willing also to suffer with Christ: by taking our stand with goodness, to suffer the attacks against goodness that always arise from the human impulses that resist the Spirit of God and the ideals of the law.



***I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (8:18)***

What we suffer from such attacks, and also from still being connected to the human world of decay and death, do not compare with the riches of the spiritual world that become our inheritance when we have given ourselves to the Christ.

***For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; (8:19)***

For even though humanity appears to resist the good, it waits ardently for those who can bear the Christ within them, for all humanity knows, deep in the heart, that it is only through those who are bearers of the Christ that hope can be made real.

***for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope (8:20)***

The very nature of the created world is futility, destruction, and death – it had to be this way; it was the will of the Creator. Because only in this way,

***that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (8:21)***

through being set free by the power of the Christ from bondage to this decay, can the human being realize the freedom and glory that rightfully belong to it as an inheritance from the divine. (Only through experiencing the futility of the world and overcoming it through the inner work of the Christ is consciousness of the divine even possible.) [Today I would say that only through suffering can love, which is born in the compassionate response to suffering, be consciously realized.]

***We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; (8:22)***

Human life is characterized by suffering, but this suffering is necessary for the birth of the Kingdom of God in human experience.

***and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in***

***hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? (8:23-4)***

Salvation has given us not certainty, but hope. Hope heals, but certainty makes us complacent. If we are certain, we do not know hope.

***But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (8:25)***

When we have hope for that of which we are not yet certain, we become able to wait in patience for it, to live with the uncertainty.

***Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (8:26)***

We are not alone, left to our own devices. Something beyond us and greater than us comes to meet us, and helps us in our uncertainty. It resonates with our prayers and carries them up to heaven,

***And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (8:27)***

and God actually hears them, because all workings of the Spirit of Christ are known to God. In fact, it is the divine will that we be reached and aided by the Spirit.

***We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (8:28)***

We can have faith that even if we are ignorant of the outcome, it will be good as long as we are subject to the call of the Spirit [God's love working within us as we open ourselves to it].

***For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (8:29-31)***

If God leads us on the path toward the fulfillment of our destiny, then who can hinder our progress? Who can condemn us? The divine presence comes to meet us when we approach it through the power of its own goodness and love – and having met us, it remains with us until its purpose has been fulfilled.

["Those whom he predestined": God provides a destiny for each of us through which we may be fulfilled (Jeremiah 1:5). "Those whom he justified": whom he made upright through transforming faith. "He also glorified": brought us to a place of fulfillment inspiring our gratitude. (2018)]

***He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (8:32)***

Since God has given us the gift of the prophets, and the gift of the Christ which God has shown through them and specifically through Jesus, will God not lead us the rest of the way? After having brought us this far, will God not take us to our path's completion? Will we not receive everything we require to attain it?

***Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (8:33-34)***

If the Christ itself, at "the right hand of God," that is, God's nature reaching out to us and grasping us [in the form of pure love], is guiding our way, then no human agency can deny us our destiny.

***Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (8:35)***

God's guiding and sustaining love, shown as the Christ, is with us regardless of the nature or intensity of the suffering we may experience.

***As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." (8:36)***

In this case, all our suffering is *for God's sake* (as in the prayer of Levi Isaac of Berdichev). That is, even though suffering is not inherently good, God uses our sufferings to fulfill God's plan for us. Our suffering is then redeemed, and we extract from it a blessing.

[The prayer of Levi Isaac of Berdichev: “God, I do not ask you why I suffer, but only that I suffer for your sake.” (2018)]

***No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (8:37)***

God's using every one of our sufferings for divine purposes makes us “conquerors”: our trials do not destroy us; they only bring us closer to our destiny [fulfillment].

***For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:38-39)***

Therefore nothing in all creation, nothing imaginable, of human, spiritual, or demonic origin, can keep us from our destiny or deny us the guiding hand of God. Because we progress along our path not primarily through our own power, but through the love of God in the Christ that Jesus has shown to us [and been for us].

# Romans 9-11

I have not commented directly on the later chapters of Romans because I received no commentary on them that night in 1996. The first eight chapters form a unit, after which Paul turns to another topic. The relationship between Romans 1-8 and Romans 9-11 has been explored from many angles. Some have seen the second part as merely an appendix to the first, or even an anticlimax following the glorious language that closes the first part. Others see these subsequent chapters forming a continuous narrative with the preceding ones, perhaps even as the climax of the book outlining the fulfillment of Paul's main project in Romans, which is to bring the Gentiles into the People of God.

The interpretation of Romans 9-11 is fraught with difficulties, and historical developments as well as the complexities of the text itself have made the meaning of this section extremely hard to recover. I have struggled with these chapters for years, and have become so aware of their problems that I could not find much worth in them – until I reevaluated them from within the context of the preceding commentary on chapters 1-8. This context provides perhaps a new way of looking at these chapters – once again (recall the Introduction), one that is present in the text but that may transcend Paul's conscious intent. Or maybe not. I believe Paul really could have intended something like the interpretation presented here. Some scholars may disagree. It doesn't matter. The insights I have gained from considering Paul's words come directly from Paul, and it is to him that I feel indebted. The power of an inspired text cannot be limited to what textual and historical analyses tell us about the text's origin. There is a reason these words were incorporated into Holy Scripture; there is a wisdom behind it, which goes beyond the conscious understanding of the people who put them there.

(I will give one other illustration of this last point. The “two accounts of the Creation,” Genesis 1 and 2, are well known. So are their contradictions. How did these two very different versions make it into the same Bible? Various theories exist about the origin of each one, and how a “redactor” put them together. Perhaps this redactor just wanted to include traditions from different subgroups of the population. I think there is another reason. Taken together, these two Creation accounts become a powerful depiction of the contrast between the eternal and the temporal, between essence and existence. Together these two stories, which conflict only superficially, express a profound spiritual truth that neither one of them alone could capture. They tell us of the split within

creation, to which God's reconciliation with humanity at the end of the Gospel story is the final answer. I do not think this result of juxtaposing the first two chapters of Genesis is coincidental, even though – and we will never know for sure – it may well have completely escaped the consciousness of the hypothetical redactor. A deeper wisdom was working.)

As the commentary on chapters 1-8 helped me understand the rest of Romans, I discovered a bitter irony: that Paul wanted to heal the rift between Jew and Gentile, whereas the way these chapters were most often understood and used has only exacerbated that rift.

The direction we follow – whether towards the healing interpretation or towards the divisive one – will depend on how we understand *faith*. This is absolutely critical: the meaning of chapters 9-11 (and indeed the epistle as a whole) changes radically depending on how one defines this word. Let us recapitulate the understanding of faith that came from our consideration of Romans 1-8:

*Faith is an inner transformation, a transformation of the heart through contact with the love shown in Christ, which gives us confidence and changes our motivations so that we act not from greed and fear but from the desire to express this love. In this way faith “justifies” us; that is, it makes us “righteous.”*  
***This is the true meaning of “justification by faith.”***

In my other writings I define faith as ***the awareness of the power of eternity***. These two definitions of faith are two ways of saying the same thing: in faith we are held by the eternal dimension of life, which gives us both guidance and destiny.

Keeping this in mind, let us first consider these chapters in the light of the preceding commentary and this definition of faith. Afterwards we will look at them as they have usually been understood, in terms of a faith defined as belief. The shift from defining faith as inner transformation to defining it as belief has led to dogmatic interpretations of these chapters which, unfortunately, have provided support for anti-Semitism. The purpose of the following exposition is to show that such support lacks foundation and to cast a different light on Paul's view of salvation history.

(Some defenders of the traditional view maintain that faith is not simply belief understood as intellectual assent to a proposition; it is also *trust*, both in God and in Jesus Christ. But trust cannot be commanded; it may lie beyond the reach of some whose life experiences have taught them not to trust. Trust cannot be realized through an act of will. So if

faith is trust, and trust comes only by the grace of God, then salvation is reserved only for those whom God chooses arbitrarily – a Calvinist view that should be considered morally questionable and inconsistent with God’s goodness. The approach to faith presented here shows us a way towards acquiring it, especially for those for whom life has made trust difficult. It also does not hold a simplistic view of “salvation” in which only those with a religiously acceptable “faith” are saved.)

## Romans 9

Having outlined a magnificent account of the content and development of faith in the first eight chapters, Paul now turns to a problem he sees in communicating that faith. Why, he wonders, have his own people failed to accept this faith, the very people from whom Jesus came? This question is a source of anguish to him (v. 2), so Paul examines it to see if he can find within it a redemptive meaning.

Paul’s major insight comes at the beginning of the chapter:

***It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. (9:6-8)***

Paul is redefining the meaning of “Israel,” God’s people, the community of faith. It is exactly that: a community of *faith*, not of blood ties. That was Christ’s message: members of the Spiritual Community (cf. Tillich’s use of the term in *Systematic Theology III*) are characterized not by ethnic origin or religious practice but by their *faith*, specifically the faith rooted in the love taught by Christ. This was Jesus’s own great discovery as his destiny became revealed to him through his ministry. At first, he saw himself called not to the Gentiles but only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6). But before long he found himself caring for Romans and Canaanites and Samaritans. By the end of the Gospel it becomes clear that Jesus’s ministry is universal. It was Jesus’s task to preach to the whole world the covenant with God that his own people had discovered. It was his mission to let all people know they are included in God’s love and so invited to join the Spiritual Community.

Paul quotes Hosea to support his thesis:

***“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they shall be called children of the living God.” (9:25-26)***

The concept of a people of the covenant grew out of the history of Israel. Paul universalizes this idea, making membership open to all who join on the basis of faith. This is consistent with Jesus’s life and mission.

But how to explain those of the original Israel who have not joined? Paul makes this difficult statement:

***What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. (9:30-32)***

This passage should be understood in terms of our previous commentary. The “law,” or more specifically in this context, a revealed set of moral guidelines, cannot “justify”; that is, it cannot make one righteous. True righteousness comes from a transformation of the heart formed in love. One cannot make oneself good simply by possessing a set of rules, no matter how noble. One may try, but one is not really changed. That is the “stumbling stone.” Paul maintains that righteousness comes only through faith, which is change from within. (These statements should not be construed as promoting the erroneous idea that Judaism is a religion of “salvation through works.” We will discuss this in more detail in our final summary.)

## Romans 10

“For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (10:4). The law is not an end in itself. The end, the *telos*, the purpose of the law is to bring us to the Christ; that is, to a life of righteousness and ultimately to faith. “The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Before we are ready to experience the inner transformation of faith we need the law’s guidelines to show us life in obedience to God’s will. Once we acquire true faith, which includes the desire to follow God’s will not from obligation or fear of punishment but



because our hearts have been changed, the purpose of the disciplinarian has been served. “For everyone who believes” is an unfortunate translation because in Greek there are not separate words for “belief” and “faith” as there are in English; it is all faith. “For everyone who has faith” is a better rendering.

***Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim). (10:5-8)***

Thus whatever this “faith” is, it must be more than belief, because it must not be just on one’s lips or on one’s mind but in one’s heart.

The next couple of verses might seem to contradict our thesis:

***Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (10:9-10)***

A different meaning comes to the surface with a better rendering of verse 10: “For one has faith within one’s heart and so is made righteous.” It is the inner transformation of the heart through love, and not just belief in something, that “justifies” or makes one conform willingly to God’s righteousness. Confessing Jesus as Lord will not by itself make one righteous. This “confession” means placing one’s confidence in Jesus as the teacher of faith. Recognizing the significance of Jesus as Christ, of his life and of his death, brings us into contact not only with his teachings but with his example. Being exposed to the love that shone through Jesus, we can allow it to enter our own hearts as well, and then we are changed. That, and not just what we believe, is what transforms and saves us. *One has faith with the heart and so is justified:* this one brief sentence includes all of the preceding.

This brings Paul to a great conclusion: “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). There is no distinction of ethnicity in defining the covenant people. The fulfillment of Jewish prophecy has arrived and the covenant now belongs to all people, all who would

willingly enter into it. “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7). As Paul says, quoting Joel 2:32, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (10:13).

If this faith is open to everyone, and if as Paul says it has already been proclaimed (10:18), then what can it mean that the original Israel has not completely accepted it? Paul gives us a hint, quoting Deuteronomy 32:21: “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation” (10:19). He develops this theme in detail in the following chapter.

## Romans 11

As if anticipating how his words might be used (and how later on they actually were used), Paul asserts emphatically that the Jews are *not* rejected by God: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” (11:1). As he said, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” (9:4). There is actually a divine purpose to Israel’s incomplete absorption into the new faith community:

***So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now 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 the key to Paul’s argument: Israel’s entrance into the new covenant community has been delayed to allow space for the Gentiles, who Paul hoped would then arouse jealousy in his people through the richness of their faith and so attract them as well. Then the universal Spiritual Community, with no one excluded, would be complete.

And so Paul warns the Gentile converts not to consider themselves superior to those among the Jewish people who have not joined:

***But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through***

***faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. (11:17-20)***

Once again, “They were broken off because of their unbelief” is not a preferred translation, since “unbelief” in Greek is simply the negation of the word for “faith”: “They were broken off due to their lack of faith.” Boasting, arrogance, an attitude of exclusivity, are signs of a lack of love and so are not appropriate within the community of faith. [And those same qualities indicate a lack of true faith even in some who profess Christian faith. (2018)]

Paul’s vision of this community is inclusive and universal. The absence of the Jews is temporary, so as to make space for the Gentiles; eventually all will be included:

***And even those [of Israel], if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.... So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved. (11:23, 25-26)***

Paul does call the absence of faith “disobedience” since all are called to be part of this community, but this is not a specifically Jewish trait. It characterizes all and must be overcome by all:

***Just as you [Gentiles] were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they [Israel] have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. (11:30-32)***

In conclusion, Paul’s vision is a challenge to Jews and Gentiles alike, and is meant to shake up both. Jews are called upon to change their traditional understanding of who constitutes the covenant people. Gentiles are called upon not to feel superior to Jews or to marginalize them but to treat them with love and gratitude for having carried the covenant that now includes them as well. This is strong medicine for both communities, as subsequent history has abundantly shown. Yet the Messianic era for which we are all called to work – an era in which our dealings with each other will be governed by the non-self-interested love that Jesus taught – will necessarily shake up each one of us and challenge our preconceptions. It will be no surface change but a radical transformation of the heart, as Paul outlined in his first eight chapters.

[We cannot conclude this section without mentioning something extremely important: For Paul there is only one Israel, meaning God's covenant community, and therefore *there is only one Covenant*. "Covenant" with a capital "C" signifies the reciprocal promise God entered into with the children of Israel, and that Jesus representing the culmination of Hebrew prophecy extended to all people. There is not an "Old" Covenant and a "New" Covenant, nor is there an "Old" Testament and a "New" Testament. *There is only one Covenant*, the one that began with the Hebrew people and to which Gentiles were "grafted in." This should make us rethink the way we approach the Bible. (2018)]

### **But Now for the Dark Side**

If we consider the core of Paul's vision as outlined above, we will see that it is very consistent with Jesus's ministry and role as Jewish prophet. Jesus's task was to redefine the covenant and proclaim it to all people. This is also essentially what Paul has done. However, these chapters contain many unfortunate turns of phrase that have had regrettable consequences throughout the ages. As a result, this central message has gotten lost. Here are just some of these passages:

***What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction. (9:22)***

***Being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. (10:3)***

***But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people." (10:21)***

***What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." (11:7-8)***

***As regards the gospel they are enemies. (11:28)***

It may simply not be possible to read these passages today, after centuries of tension between Christians and Jews, without experiencing them as encouraging anti-Jewish feeling. Unfortunately, many exegetes tend to gloss over their implications, but these are serious and we cannot

afford to ignore them. We also need to remember that Paul's letters were occasional, written for a specific time and specific place in response to a specific situation. But once a piece of writing is designated as Holy Scripture people assume it applies to all times and places and to every situation just as originally written. The tendency to do this in any religious body of writing, including the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, has caused tremendous damage. So I like to hope that had Paul been able to see into the future, or had he known that what he wrote would someday be called the word of God, he would have chosen a different way to express himself. Paul certainly did not know at the time that he was actually writing the Bible.

What can we make of these passages? Paul no doubt felt frustrated that his own people were not joining him in the new faith he came to proclaim. He believed his faith was a saving faith and would lead to redemption for all people. We can assume he meant what he said about feeling heartbroken on losing his own people. So no doubt Paul's human emotional reactions found their way in among his more inspired passages. This is the greatest challenge we face when reading the Bible: how to discern the human from the divine, the reaction of the moment from the timeless inspiration. It is like trying to tell the wheat from the weeds (Matthew 13:24ff). I hope the preceding commentary has shown that there is in this letter much timeless inspiration, and its record over the years has also demonstrated that. But also present is Paul the human being, who still must be considered. Fundamentalists have it easy; they don't need to consider it because for them every single word of the Bible is the literal word of God. But fundamentalists pay a tremendous price for this simplicity; or more accurately, they exact a tremendous price from the world for it, in the form of an intolerant faith that has created division and violence and has betrayed the very message Jesus and Paul so passionately hoped to pass down to us.

For this reason, an interpretation of Paul is necessary that solves these ethical problems yet also makes clear Paul's relevance for our spiritual lives.



# Romans 12-16

## Romans 12

*We can see these chapters forming the third main division of an integral whole. In chapters 1-8 Paul describes the content and development of the new faith. In chapters 9-11 Paul fleshes out the implications of the first section, emphasizing the universality of the new faith and its ability to transcend the boundary that separates Jew from Gentile. Now in this section Paul applies this faith to the life of the new community.*

There is more great writing here: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Being transformed by the new faith enables one to resist the toxic trends in society. One hopes this would also include the ability, when imbued by the love of Christ, to resist the exclusivity and intolerance resulting from narrow and literal interpretations of Paul’s own words, especially when such interpretations have become the social norm.

The new community will reflect unity in diversity. Echoing 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (12:4-5). Differences are not to be feared but respected; indeed, even seen as a strength.

Next comes a summary of the new faith taking form in practice. We can hear the teachings of Jesus behind the words of Paul:

***Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to***

***be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:9-21)***

There is one view of Paul that says, with some justification, that Paul taught the death and resurrection of Jesus at the expense of Jesus's teachings. While Paul rarely quotes Jesus directly, here, as in 1 Corinthians 13, we can sense Jesus's influence. And like Jesus's exhortations in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul's advice can be followed only if one has internalized the love that Jesus expressed through his presence. Paul is asking us to live like Christ.

### Romans 13

After exhorting the people to respect the governing authorities Paul continues:

***Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (13:8-10)***

Here Paul recaps the solution he found to the problem he posed in chapter 7. The commandments so hard to obey by force of will power, even the notoriously difficult "You shall not covet," can be fulfilled naturally and willingly by a heart imbued with love. "Love is the fulfilling of the law": living in faith that comes from the transformation of the heart through love, one can fulfill the law without feeling that one fights against one's own nature. [Cf. Matthew 22:37-40. (2018)]

"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (13:12). The spiritual struggle becomes defined less in terms of good and evil and more as light vs. darkness. Those who have difficulty observing the commandments are not necessarily evil. They lack



sufficient awareness of the love that makes observance possible. Living in the absence of love is like searching in the absence of light. Jesus knew this when he prayed for the forgiveness of those *who did not know what they were doing*. Love is essentially *awareness*, and a metaphor for awareness is light.

#### Romans 14

Paul continues his description of the life of the faith community, composed of Jews and Gentiles alike. I love this: ***“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions”*** (14:1). Wouldn't that be wonderful! Here is another important pronouncement:

***Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. (14:5-6)***

Jews living with the expanded understanding of covenant need not give up their Sabbath and holiday observances, the things that are important to them as Jews. Some liturgical revisions may be necessary to reflect the new understanding, but the rites themselves may be preserved.

***We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (14:7-8)***

These verses became the text of a beautiful Spanish hymn that, in my work in hospice, I have sung to many people as they were dying. The hymn continues: “In sadness or in pain, in beauty or in love, whether we suffer or rejoice, we are the Lord's.” We are all one in the new body of faith.

In the rest of this chapter Paul works toward reconciliation between the Jewish and Gentile segments of the community. In the incident at Antioch related in Galatians 2, where Paul clashed with Peter on sharing meals with Gentiles, Paul showed a passionate concern that traditions about food and table fellowship not become a force of

separation and fragmentation of the community. Here Paul takes a gentler approach, urging each side to respect the customs of the other:

***Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. (14:13-21)***

Paul condemns neither side – those Jews who still want to observe the food laws may do so; indeed, if their conscience forbids them from violating those laws then they must keep them (v. 23). Table fellowship must bring people together, not become a source of resentment and contention.

## Chapters 15-16

Paul concludes his plea for reconciliation. “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (15:2) – That about says it all. “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another” (15:5).

The one God is the God of all, and the people need to reflect this oneness.

***Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.***

***As it is written, “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him.” (15:7-11)***

There is a bit of a play on words here: in the Hebrew Bible, the word here rendered “Gentiles” literally means “nations.” Israel too was a “nation” in this sense. But as the word became applied to “the nations of the earth,” it later also took on the meaning of “Gentiles.” Gentiles and Jews now join together in praising God.

After informing his correspondents of his travel plans, followed by a list of greetings to a number of people in Rome (which, if nothing else, shows us how active women were in the church), Paul once again presses for a united community: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them” (16:17). He ends his letter with praise to God, who has granted “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles” (16:25-26). Now in fulfillment of the mission of Christ, all the people of the earth will attain the knowledge of God revealed in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. *Christianity is not a new faith formed over and against Judaism. Rather, Jewish prophecy has expanded to become one faith encompassing all.* “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7).

The “New Perspective” has criticized traditional ways of reading Romans for splitting off the first eight chapters from the rest of the letter as if they were two separate documents on two different themes. This is correct. Those who see Paul’s Letter to the Romans as one complete piece, rather than one section on justification followed by another on communal relations, are right. But the unifying theme is not simply Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, though that indeed is present. The principal connector is *faith itself*: a faith that grows through the transformation of the heart by Christlike love (Part 1), that has the power to dissolve the barriers separating Jews and Gentiles (Part 2), and that enriches the life of the community (Part 3). If we see faith as the unifier, then every chapter of the letter makes sense and has its place within the whole.



# Conclusion:

## Proposing “A Different Perspective”

Paul’s Letter to the Romans is notoriously difficult to understand, and as I mentioned at the outset, two thousand years later scholars are still arguing about what Paul meant and even proposing contradictory opinions. After being exposed to a number of these, I had to suspend them for just a while and let myself “get into” the book and allow it to speak to me. It is immensely difficult to come to a work as well known and thoroughly discussed as Romans without any preconceptions.

I would like to consider two ways of looking at Romans and then propose a third. In doing so I realize the issues are vast, and volumes would be needed to do full justice to them. Indeed, volumes have been written and are still being written. My aim is only to sketch an outline of why I find previous perspectives wanting and the need I see for a different one, not necessarily “instead of” but “in addition to.”

### 1. The “Old Perspective”

The terms “Old Perspective” and “New Perspective” in referring to Pauline studies were coined by the Bible scholar James D. G. Dunn. The “Old Perspective” historically refers to Paul’s work as interpreted by Martin Luther and subsequently by the Protestant Reformers. Within this approach the key issue at stake is how the individual attains salvation. Paul considers and rejects the (assumed) Jewish way, which is based on “works of the law.” In its place he substitutes faith in Jesus Christ alone.

The Lutheran view, variants of which were adopted by most Protestants, considers Judaism a “legalistic” religion. This means it is based on the belief that we can merit salvation through our own efforts; specifically, by obeying the law and doing good works. This attitude only makes us arrogant and leads to boasting: we take credit for our supposed (and often imaginary) accomplishments and feel unjustifiably good about ourselves. Protestants call this “works righteousness.” But it is all self-deception, because “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (3:10). We are wretched sinful beings who can do nothing good on our own and who deserve condemnation, yet we fancy ourselves good.

Such is the Jewish conceit. In fact, the more we try to make ourselves good, the harder we fail. Sin even uses the law as its instrument (7:8): by telling us what is forbidden, it increases our temptation and leads us to sin even more. Once we confront our inability to attain righteousness through our own efforts, we will see that the law only leads us into sin. The only way out is through faith. "Faith" means accepting Jesus Christ as Lord, God, and Savior, and through this faith we are "justified." We attain the status of righteousness in a way the law can never accomplish, because the righteousness of Christ, who paid with his blood on the cross for all our sins, is imputed to us. We are justified in this way by faith alone: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). Being "in Christ Jesus" is taken to mean having faith in him, believing in him, trusting in him. In this way we are saved.

### **Criticism of the Old Perspective**

This classic Protestant view of Paul was and still is very influential. It is difficult to read Paul even today without being influenced by it, especially since most translations seem geared to it. Nevertheless, it is based on a number of misconceptions.

Research on first century Judaism has called into question the picture of Judaism on which much of the classic view is based. The pioneer in this field was E. P. Sanders in his work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders pointed out that Jews do not "earn salvation" by keeping the law or lose it if they don't. The law or *torah* is the mark of one's already being included in the covenant, which is based on God's grace. Judaism already has a mechanism for atonement and forgiveness, so one is never left in despair if one fails to keep all of the law. Luther's portrayal of Judaism through the eyes of Paul is a distortion resulting from Luther's projection of his dispute with the Catholic Church onto Paul's conflict with traditional Judaism.

Sanders is essentially correct, and I would go even further. Traditional Protestants have maligned Judaism, calling it "legalism" and a religion of "salvation through works." Christian defenders of Judaism say no, in Judaism one does not earn salvation through works but is saved through the grace of God. To Jewish ears the entire discussion sounds bizarre. Judaism does not fixate on salvation and the afterlife as much of Christianity does. There is no sharp dichotomy between the everlasting joy of heaven and the endless pain of hell. One keeps the laws not in order to earn salvation but because God commanded them. The laws and observances signify the Jews' everlasting covenant with God, and it is for the love of God that Jews follow them. Jews who fail to observe these ordinances are still Jews. They do not lose their "salvation"

and they do not go to hell. In Judaism, “salvation” does not signify the individual’s destiny after death, but rather deliverance of the Jewish people from the suffering they have experienced in every generation.

This disconnect between Jewish and Christian use of the same language brings us up against a significant development within Christianity. Jesus was a Jew; he identified as a Jew and he taught as a Jew. His message was to distill the essence of the *torah* as a command to love God and our fellow human beings: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Jesus was not primarily concerned about how one procures one’s eternal salvation. Such concerns are purely self-interested. Jesus wanted to draw people out of their own self-interest with a love that calls them to something greater than the self.

(It is worth noting that the Jewish sage Hillel taught something very similar. When asked to describe Judaism “while standing on one foot” he said: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; all the rest is commentary.” There is nothing in that essential description about how to get to heaven when you die.)

Shortly after Jesus’s death the message changed. It became less about the teachings of Jesus and more about the resurrection of Christ. It became less about practicing the universal and nondiscriminatory love that Jesus taught and more about attaining individual salvation. Not that love was always missing; it just took a back seat to soteriology, and that emphasis has persisted to this day. It is true that Paul frequently exhorts the members of his communities to love one another, but this is the love of one’s neighbor, the members of one’s own group. What becomes less prominent than it was with Jesus is the conscious striving towards the love of the stranger, of the outsider, those who do not belong to one’s ethnic group or even to one’s community of faith. As Christianity developed and became itself a new kind of “group,” concern about salvation came to occupy the central position that this “groupless” love once had in the ministry of Jesus. To see this more clearly, consider that if you were to encounter an evangelist in the street who wanted to test whether or not you were truly a Christian, the first question you’d hear would not likely be “Do you love?” but “Are you saved?”

The major disagreements between Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists centered on this – how to assure one’s own salvation after one dies – and the stakes were considered so high that it was even worth going to war. So in the name of the Prince of Peace we witnessed the French wars of religion, the Schmalkaldic War in the Holy Roman Empire, and the devastating Thirty Years’ War, fought between groups who detested each other’s programs for salvation and who believed the

others were leading their followers down the road to hell. And those wars were just for starters.

If nothing else, these historical consequences should be sufficient evidence of the egotism of the personal quest for a happy fate after death. Jesus did not come so that we might be more concerned about ourselves, more fearful about what is going to happen to *me*. In the true spirit of Christ we should care only about serving one another, not even giving thought to whether we are saved or damned – and that, in fact, is what will save us. If we are in the love Christ showed us, what else is there to care about? Yet we place more weight – and worse, we think God does also – on what a person believes than on the kind of person one is. That is the legacy of “faith alone.” It makes it impossible to view as equals those whose beliefs are different, even if they happen to be much better people than we are.

Jesus came to teach us how to love, not to terrify us with threats of unceasing pain or to tempt us to dehumanize others who may even conform more closely to the love of Christ but who just happen to believe differently. What would Jesus, who said “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13), think of a religion established in his name whose primary concern is to procure one's own personal salvation?

### **On Justification**

We mentioned earlier that a critical factor determining whether our path will be a healing one is what we mean by *faith*. In the Old Perspective faith is understood essentially as the *belief* in, or acceptance of, Jesus Christ as Lord, God, and Savior, with a trust in God growing as a result. Through this belief one is “justified,” that is, accounted righteous, and one's sins are considered as paid, washed away. How is one brought to righteousness simply by believing? It is not our own righteousness that does it but the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us as though it were our own.

The problem with this doctrine is obvious and well known. History has proven over and over again that belief alone, even with a trust in the God in whom one believes, does not make one righteous. We have mentioned the numerous wars fought in the name of religion. We could also mention corruption in the churches, as well as countless sins committed in spite of their belief by those who believe. In what meaningful sense, then, can this faith be said to “justify” anyone?



Of course answers are given. One is that true faith is known by its fruits. However, not all believers produce good fruits. If one doubts the faith of such believers because their works are bad, then works, not faith, become the criterion of righteousness. Another answer is that Jesus paid for all sins, past and future. What, then, is to keep one from sinning in the future and thinking there will be no consequences, since the debt has already been paid?

If we dig deeper into the doctrine, more problems arise. At the foundation of justification by faith in the traditional sense we find the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and the specific form of it known as "penal substitution." Jesus took the punishment we all deserve, to satisfy God's justice and to spare us from God's wrath. He took our sins upon himself, and imputed to us his righteousness so that we could be spared his fate.

The problems with this idea are legion. We will outline only a few.

First, there is the obvious difficulty of inflicting someone else's punishment on an innocent victim, especially a punishment so sadistic. One answer given is that since Jesus is God, it is really God taking the punishment upon Himself. If that is the case, then why is the punishment even necessary? The debt is owed to God, and the owner of a debt who has forgiven that debt forgets it; he does not pay it back to himself. The debt is simply canceled.

If God wished to spare human beings the punishment we deserve, why not forgive the way Christ asked us to forgive, and let it go? Can divine forgiveness be any less than human forgiveness? Can God refuse to do the very thing God requires us to do? The answer usually given is that God's justice must be satisfied. But we humans are asked to forgive in spite of justice, and for the sake of love – is God's love any less than our own? God is the author of justice, and can overrule justice in favor of love if that is truly God's purpose. However, if justice is such that even God must answer to it, then there is something higher than God, and so God would not really be God. But there is no justice higher than God's will. After all Paul himself tells us, "Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (Romans 9:14-15).

And even if "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), is it really true that we all deserve to be crucified? There are surely many people whose good deeds outweigh their bad, and even of the others there are many who certainly do not deserve the torturous fate that Christ endured. I work in a nursing home with many frail and

gentle people who could not harm anyone. Imperfect though they may be, do they collectively deserve to be crucified? Yet this is exactly what the doctrines of “total depravity” and substitutionary atonement imply. It would seem that the God of the Protestant Reformers hates the human race so much that were it not for the generous self-sacrificial act of Christ, this God would crucify us all and send us to hell forever. Conventional wisdom often tells us the God of the “Old Testament” is a God of wrath while the New Testament God is a God of love. Penal substitution completely reverses this “conventional wisdom.” *The God of the Hebrew Bible forbade Abraham from sacrificing his innocent son.* The New Testament God inflicts a bloody, agonizing, punishing death on His own innocent son. Such is the understanding of divine justice that ultimately it was not the Jews who killed Christ, it was not the Romans – it was God Himself!

The imputation of righteousness, were it even possible, does not actually make one righteous. Justification is not transformation. It is unconditional acceptance of everything we do. For the believing Christian all sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven because Jesus already paid for them. So why worry anymore about sinning? The moral problem is obvious. Of course one may object that this is not the intent of the theology, but please consider: often throughout history Christians have felt a license to mistreat others who were not of the faith. Damnation is only the first step toward dehumanization.

Substitutionary atonement, penal substitution, justification by belief in Christ, are all ideas that came from another time with another set of values. They need to be reexamined especially in the light of Christ himself, what he taught us and what he stood for.

## 2. The “New Perspective”

As biblical scholarship began to reveal errors in the orthodox view, over the past few decades a “new” way of looking at Paul’s writings and theology has arisen. In the early sixties the scholar and theologian Krister Stendahl, perhaps best thought of as foreshadowing the “New Perspective,” set things into motion with an influential article, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” a viewpoint he expanded later in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). Stendahl maintains that what Romans really is all about is not the struggle for faith or the perils of a troubled conscience but rather the mission to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Romans 9-11 is not an appendix to Romans 1-8; it’s precisely the opposite. The letter’s “center of gravity” is chapters 9-11, to which chapters 1-8 are a “preface.”

Paul began with his mission to the Gentiles; in the opening chapters he establishes a basis for it by defining a faith equally accessible to both.

Stendahl believes our interpretation of Paul is nowhere more in error than in our understanding of Romans 7. We read that chapter projecting onto it our own personal struggles with faith and conscience: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:19). But, Stendahl says, Paul had no conflicts of conscience. On the contrary, he felt perfectly assured of his own righteousness under the law and even boasted about it: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Philippians 3:4-6).

Stendahl goes on to observe that in the rest of his letters Paul generally does not exhibit a contrite spirit but on the contrary is usually quite proud of his accomplishments. The concerns of a later age, beginning with the conflicted conscience of Augustine as expressed in his *Confessions* and continuing with guilt-ridden Martin Luther chafing under the Catholic system of penance, were superimposed onto Paul's writing. But Paul was not preoccupied with any of that. Paul's interest was in winning the Gentiles for the new church. So what Paul really says is that the law is good, that he has fulfilled the law, but that the law no longer defines the covenant people. It is now based on faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, a faith open to Gentiles and Jews equally.

Other writers picked up these themes and developed them further. As they rightly insist, there is no one "New Perspective" on Paul, since they differ with each other on many issues. Yet one pervasive theme is the emphasis that Paul's greatest priority, especially in Romans, is the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant community, and therefore everything else is secondary.

N.T. Wright, an influential New Perspective scholar, sees Paul's idea of justification tied inextricably to the incorporation of the Gentiles into the new Israel. Wright insists one must understand justification within the context of both the covenant and of Paul's eschatology. In the coming new age, the age of the final resurrection, God will be recognized as the ruler of all without distinction. But to participate in the resurrection one must become part of the covenant community. One does this by faith, through confessing one's belief in Jesus Christ as Lord (Romans 10:9). This is what it means to be "justified": it is to be declared and known as a member of the covenant community.

Wright emphasizes that “Justification” is “law court language”; it means acquitted, forgiven, vindicated. The eschatological event has traditionally been seen as a final judgment, a trial through which the world will at last be “put to rights.” This new age is anticipated right now in the new community of the people of God, no longer defined by ethnic descent but by faith. God’s faithfulness to the covenant consists in establishing this new creation, and those baptized into Christ are part of it now, in advance of its full realization.

Wright’s view is similar to the classical one in holding that faith in Jesus Christ is what makes one “justified,” or reckoned as righteous. Only the way it works is different. Instead of viewing the process in terms of God’s grace working through faith to replace a legalistic religion based on earning one’s salvation through good works, Wright sees it eschatologically, as anticipating the final verdict in the divine law court. While the classical view sees justification as the imputation to sinners of the surplus of Jesus’s own merit, Wright sees it as a declaration of acquittal, which the court applies regardless of what the defendant may have done or will do in the future. The faith community consists of those in whom the new age has already been actualized. To be justified by faith means to be *identified* as a member of that community. The doctrine of justification is not about how one comes to faith or gets converted. It is about how one can tell who does and who does not belong to the people of God.

This brief summary does not even begin to cover the spectrum of views included in the “New Perspective,” but hopefully is enough to highlight some basic principles that will become important in the critique and in the conclusion to follow.

### **Criticism of the New Perspective: Stendahl**

Clearly I cannot go into the nuances of all the differences between the various New Perspective writers. The present concern is the general de-emphasis of the individual spiritual struggle in Paul in favor of his mission to proselytize the Gentiles. Both Stendahl and Wright are examples of this trend. Without question, Paul’s mission to the Gentiles is central to his theology. However, not only do we give up a lot when we subordinate everything else to it, we also have to read the biblical text selectively – which is exactly what New Perspective writers warn us not to do.

I am willing to concede Stendahl’s point that Paul may not have been a master of introspection. This is not Dostoyevsky writing *Notes from the Underground*. There was no psychology or psychoanalysis back

in the first century. But there was concern about sin. Why else would Jesus have preached so often about forgiveness, even counseling us to ask God for forgiveness in our daily prayers? Even the Hebrew Bible speaks of sin offerings and the unceasing need for atonement. People wanted to be right with God.

The New Perspective tradition downplays this theme. While arguing persuasively for the restoration of chapters 9-11 to their rightful place as an integral part, indeed the centerpiece of the letter, it bleeds too much of the energy out of chapters 1-8. In particular, there is a tendency to trivialize chapter 7 and to downplay the impact of its very strong language.

***While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. (7:5)***

***I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (7:9-10)***

***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (7:15)***

***Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (7:24)***

Stendahl reduces all of this to "the rather trivial observation that every man knows that there is a difference between what he ought to do and what he does" (*Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* [Fortress, 1976], p. 93). "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" This is trivial?

Is this just Paul the master of rhetoric striking poses, engaging in melodrama for the sake of enticing his Gentile converts? Or is there a reason these words have spoken to people's souls across generations? Can it be pure happenstance that this text has captured the feelings of so many in their efforts to find faith, comforting them with the knowledge that a figure as great as Paul understood their trials? I have yet to find in any New Perspective writer an exposition of this text that does justice to its power.

Stendahl handles it this way: he focuses on 7:16-17, "Now if I do what I do not want... it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within

me.” Stendahl takes this to mean that Paul is exonerating himself! “It’s not my fault,” Stendahl would have Paul say, “sin made me do it.” Thus Paul has no problem with his conscience; he can blame his actions on something outside himself, on “sin.” The plain meaning of the text, however, would seem to suggest precisely the opposite. In recognizing the power of sin, Paul has not found cause for relief. On the contrary, he becomes aware of impulses within him that defeat the intent of the law and thwart his desire to do God’s will. This is not a source of relief but of anguish. Paul himself tells us all this:

***So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (7:21-24)***

There has been much speculation as to the source of this “other law,” but Paul tells us where it comes from: it dwells in his members. That is the “law of sin,” the self-interested human impulses that act contrary to love. Finding such meaning in this text would hardly seem to be bending it out of shape.

Stendahl points to the boasting Paul of other letters (and especially Philippians 3:6) to show that Paul could not have experienced the doubts and struggles Romans 7 appears to record. This is hardly convincing, since it is by now a commonplace that those who are least secure boast the most. There has been much debate about whether the “I” in Romans 7 is Paul speaking for himself or Paul writing rhetorically. It doesn’t matter. Even if Paul’s “I” is some generic everyman, his exposition of the spiritual struggle that many do experience loses none of its power.

At the end of his article Stendahl does attempt to tackle the rest of chapter 7, but I find him so intent on proving his thesis against the apparent meaning of the text that his analysis becomes incoherent. (For a more detailed deconstruction of Stendahl’s position see my article “A Higher Power” on [www.judeochristianity.org](http://www.judeochristianity.org).)

### **Criticism of the New Perspective: Wright**

Wright is an accomplished scholar and his expertise in the language of the New Testament is readily apparent. He is concerned about correcting the excesses of the classical view stemming from Luther. In this Wright is certainly right; however, I believe he loses too

much in the process. For Wright, justification makes sense only within the context of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. Justification is essentially a marker of membership in the covenant community, now open to all. It is participation in “actualized eschatology.” It is not a response to the individual’s struggle with the tendency to sin and the effort to do God’s will. It is not about saving people from destructive and self-destructive impulses. Justification signifies a change of status, not a change of character.

Wright repeatedly admonishes us to respect the text, not to treat it selectively, and to let Paul speak through his own voice rather than ours. He praises “those who are committed to letting every word of the text count instead of eliminating those that are inconvenient for their theories” (N.T. Wright, *Justification* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009], p. 212). However, it is impossible to distill any systematic theological statement from a complex writer like Paul without emphasizing some things and downplaying others.

And so I soon found out. Accepting Wright’s promise to weigh every word of the biblical text, I picked up the book just cited and eagerly read through his exegesis of Romans to see how a New Perspective scholar makes sense out of Romans 7. I went through the treatment of the earlier chapters and my excitement grew as I anticipated a new clarification of this difficult text. It wasn’t there! In the place where it should have been I found another of Wright’s warnings to consider the whole of Scripture without prejudice:

I cannot stress too strongly the point of principle. We must read Scripture in its own way and through its own lenses, instead of imposing on it a framework of doctrine, however pastorally helpful it may appear, which is derived from somewhere else. There are many things which are pastorally helpful in the short or medium term which are not in fact grounded on the deepest possible reading of Scripture. (*Justification*, p. 233)

And in *the very next paragraph* there is this:

From Romans 6 we leap straight into Romans 8. For a lifelong exegete to skip over Romans 7 is like a thirsty Irishman ignoring a pint of Guinness. But that is what we must do, because our theme sends us straight to the great chapter where so much of Paul’s theology is summed up and celebrated. (*Justification*, pp. 233-234)

This is no time to be a teetotaler! Romans 7 is a pivotal chapter, and if we are going to “read Scripture in its own way and through its own lenses,” then we mustn’t “skip over” it. Wright does so in the name of “our theme” – but what are we doing having our own “themes” and picking and choosing our texts when we’re supposed to be letting Paul speak for himself? Once we start reordering things and omitting things, we change the nature of that which we observe; we turn it into something else.

The fact is, we cannot help organizing the material that we find in some way. That is how the human mind understands things. It is how we extract meaning from data. We must organize the data in some way before we can understand it. Everybody does it. We just have to be aware that we’re doing it, and be ready with a good case if we need one. It just won’t do to start being selective right after warning people not to be. It’s also important not to omit pieces of the argument that are so central that their absence distorts the entire message. If the New Perspective is superior to the Old (and I believe it is), it is not because it lets the pure unvarnished text speak for itself. It is because at the very least it makes an attempt to get beyond projecting one’s perceptions onto the text itself, and tries to pay closer attention to the language Paul used. Unfortunately it fails, because like the “Old Perspective” it too must be choosy with the text in order to make its interpretation stand, and the passages it either ignores or trivializes are just too important and powerful to neglect in that way.

As expert Bible translators will tell you, every translation is an interpretation. If that is true, then *a fortiori* so is every exegesis. Both the translator and the exegete must constantly make decisions about how to render a word, a phrase, an entire section, trying to choose the best of many possible renderings. With every such decision comes the risk of drifting from the original intent of the writer – assuming the latter is even accessible. But we must at least assume there is a reason for the text’s being written the way it is. There is a reason chapter 7 falls between chapters 6 and 8 rather than elsewhere or rather than not at all. Leaving chapter 7 out of the flow of the argument is a major distortion that changes the meaning of the pivotal chapter 8. The result is a different letter from the one Paul actually wrote.

I have read exegeses of Romans by several New Perspective scholars and have yet to find in any of them a treatment of chapter 7 with the seriousness it deserves. Usually it is just glossed over or grossly oversimplified as a “defense of the law,” as if the many subtleties and ambiguities it contains were not significant. This certainly amounts to applying one’s own lens to the text. The notion of a pristine *urtext* that could speak its one original truth to us if only we would let it is a myth.



We all come to the text struck by certain things, emphasizing some things at the expense of others. There is no one who is exempt from this tendency, “not even one.” And there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. A great text has many dimensions and layers of meaning. Some will focus on one, others on another. No one will capture them all. The important thing is to make sure that what we do capture is what is most significant and timeless.

Of course the danger here is unrestrained subjectivism, the notion that a text means whatever one wants it to mean – this would be to err at the other extreme. If a text can mean anything, then it means nothing. We need criteria (see next section), and one to keep in mind is the faithfulness of our interpretation to the spirit of Christ. Old Perspective ideas such as replacing one exclusive group with another, double predestination, intolerance towards non-Christians and sending them to hell, all lack this faithfulness. The New Perspective is an improvement, but it too has vulnerabilities.

These become apparent in the following summary statement:

Within this context, “justification,” as seen in 3:24-26, means that those *who believe in Jesus Christ* are declared to be members of the true covenant family; which of course means that their sins are forgiven, since that was the purpose of the covenant. They are given the status of being “righteous” in the metaphorical law court. When this is cashed out in terms of the underlying covenantal theme, it means that they are declared, in the present, to be what they will be seen to be in the future, namely the true people of God....

On this basis, Paul argues in Romans 5-8 that all who believe this gospel are the true, sin-forgiven, people of God, who are thus assured of their future salvation, which will consist in their resurrection as one aspect of the renewal of all of God’s world. (N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], pp. 129, 130, emphasis added)

This basic statement of the relationship between justification and salvation raises two ethical issues, problems inherited from the Old Perspective and not corrected in the new:

1. A dilution of the concept of “righteousness”;
2. An exclusivist definition of the covenant people.

Let us take these in turn.

In criticizing the Old Perspective it was already mentioned that belief alone does not make one righteous. This is true even if we expand the idea of “belief” from the assent of the mind to a proposition to placing one’s trust and confidence in something. History is full of people who placed their full trust and confidence in Jesus Christ as Lord their God but who treated others abominably. Now one might say those were not real Christians. But the implications of such a statement would be 1) that works are primary and one’s faith is judged by them, and 2) that few real Christians ever existed, in spite of Christianity’s having arguably been the world’s most influential religion.

Wright solves this problem by stating that to “justify” does not mean to “make righteous.” It is law-court language; it means to acquit or to vindicate, to be accorded the status of “not guilty.” It does *not* mean that the person’s character is necessarily any different from before the “justification”:

“Righteousness,” within the lawcourt setting – and this is something that no good Lutheran or Reformed theologian ought ever to object to – *denotes the status that someone has when the court has found in their favor.* Notice, it does *not* denote, within that all-important lawcourt context, “the moral character they are then assumed to have,” or “the moral behavior they have demonstrated which has earned them the verdict.”... It is possible for the judge to make a mistake, and to “justify” – that is, to find in favor of – a person who is of thoroughly bad character and who did in fact commit the crimes of which he or she had been charged. If this happens, it is still the case that the person concerned, once the verdict has been announced, is “righteous,” that is, “acquitted,” “cleared,” “vindicated,” “justified.” (*Justification*, p. 90)

So one is not necessarily different after one has been “justified.” *No inner transformation need have taken place.* Wright’s statement should be appreciated for its honesty. It also has implications for the rest of his theology.

For Wright, a central feature of Paul’s theology is that the new age has already begun. Wright calls this *inaugurated eschatology*. What was promised by God through the Jewish people has been fulfilled in Christ and has already come. This includes Messiahship (Jesus Christ is the

Messiah), resurrection (Jesus is the "first fruits" of the general resurrection), and the Kingdom of God, the "new creation" in which Christ will reign over all the earth.

That all this has now come to pass in Jesus the Messiah is a central plank in the theology of St. Paul. Cognate, and closely interwoven, with his redefinitions of monotheism and election, Paul's eschatology remains deeply Jewish in its shape and emphasis, right down to fresh retellings of the same narratives and fresh exegesis of some of the same key texts. Through his high Christology, it is indeed God's *own* future that has burst into the present. Through his incorporative Christology, summing up his redefined doctrine of election, it is *Israel's* future that has at last come to pass. Through his extraordinary interpretation of Jesus's crucifixion as the divine victory over the powers of evil, the great battle has come and gone, and the pagan powers have been decisively defeated. This is perhaps the first and most important thing to say about Paul's reworking of eschatology: that the complex event for which Israel had hoped had already happened in the events of Jesus of Nazareth. (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press , 2005], pp. 135-136)

To be sure, the process is not complete. There will still be a final judgment, in which the type of life one has led will be important. This will take place after the covenant people have already been identified through their faith in Jesus Christ. Then Jesus will be recognized by the entire creation and will hand the Kingdom over to the Father, so that God "will be all in all" (p. 136). *The final Day of the Lord is yet to come, but the Kingdom has already arrived.* It is both anticipated in the future *and* already present. While God the Father will reign in the future, Jesus the Christ reigns now (p. 137).

The problem arises: In what sense can it really be said we are living in a new age? If Jesus did not reign over the world before but reigns over it now, how can we tell? Two millennia after Christ, things are not better in the world. We have witnessed massive genocides on a scale unknown before Christ, as well as the technological development sufficient to make conceivable the destruction of the whole human race. Hatred between nations and ethnic and religious groups is worse than ever and has claimed many innocent lives. How can we say to survivors of these atrocities, Rejoice, the Messianic age has already begun, and Christ rules the earth?

As we've seen, Wright has conceded that "justification" does not transform the character of the one who is justified. One is simply forgiven one's sins by virtue of one's profession of faith in Christ. Justification is not a process of conversion or transformation; it is rather a badge of membership in the covenant community. As Wright puts it, "What Paul means by justification, in this context, should therefore be clear. It is not 'how you become a Christian,' so much as 'how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family'" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 122). But if that is the case, what reason is there to expect this to effect any real change in the world, let alone bring about the Messianic era?

Extracting the doctrine of "inaugurated eschatology" from Paul's theology and applying it to our own age is a tricky business. "Inaugurated eschatology" cannot mean the same thing to us, who live two thousand years after the Christ event with no end in sight, as it might have meant for Paul, who believed "that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15) stood a good chance of becoming eyewitnesses to the final appearance of Christ. It is very difficult to make sense of saying, as Wright puts it, that "The end of exile, the undoing of creation's bondage to decay," already "has happened in Christ and by the Spirit" (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, p. 149). No, the Prince of This World has yet to be displaced. As C.S. Lewis so appropriately put it, this earth is still "enemy-occupied territory."

And lest there be any doubt, Wright does apply Paul's theology to our own time. If the new age had already been inaugurated by the time of Paul, then we are living in it too.

Teach someone to think through, from first principles, what it means to live in the new age inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, and you equip them not only for that particular topic but for every other question they may meet. That is the kind of thing Paul is doing again and again. Only if we are bent on flattening Jesus and Paul out into "teachers of religion and ethics," rather than people who believed that God was at last fulfilling his promises and launching his new age upon the world, will we think otherwise. (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, pp. 160-161)

So the new age has arrived. Nevertheless, neither the individual nor the world has been transformed. Even justification has been reduced from a mark of spiritual struggle and progress to a badge of identity. Paul supposedly was not talking about how the individual progresses spiritually (even if he appeared to be); everything he preached had

primarily to do with missionizing the Gentiles. This raises the question: Then how is Paul relevant for us today? It also creates a disconnect between Romans 7 and Romans 8. The glorious vision in chapter 8 is the response to the anguished question of chapter 7 (v. 24): "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Only in the context of this question can the answer of chapter 8 truly be understood: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:1-2). By jumping over chapter 7 and losing the question, Wright reduces this great response to a matter of status: one is now a member of the new community of faith; this is what justification means, even though things have not yet really changed. Wright fails to explain how membership in this group sets one free from the law of sin and death. Sin, death, corruption and human depravity, continue just as before. "*Righteousness*" has been reduced to *membership in a group*, rather than a fundamental transformation of the individual. This creates the first ethical issue mentioned earlier.

Romans 8 is just too large, its language too imposing, to be reduced to a revision of ethnic definitions for the new community. Romans 7 is too deep, its language too penetrating, to be glossed over as merely a defense of the law. But how Romans 8 answers the questions of Romans 7 is not simple. We will return to that later.

We now turn to the second ethical issue, which results from the first: an exclusivist definition of the covenant people. First we need to clarify a little further Wright's view of eschatology.

We have been discussing justification by faith extensively, yet some of Wright's critics accuse him of teaching justification by works (which for such critics might as well be devil worship). They quote passages from Wright supporting this. So which is it, by faith or by works? According to Wright, it is both. There are two stages to Wright's eschatology, and two corresponding "verdicts." There is *inaugurated* and there is *ultimate* eschatology (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, p. 151). And there is the *present* judgment corresponding to the former, and the *future* judgment corresponding to the latter (*Justification*, p. 190). The present judgment is by faith, through which the faithful are granted a verdict of acquittal. But there will be a second judgment, a final judgment, which will be according to works (Romans 2:1-16). And it is pretty hard to get around Paul's language: "For he will repay according to each one's deeds" (Romans 2:6). That seems to make it clear: we are not justified by faith alone; works are important too.

So what exactly happens? If we miss the “faith” chance at salvation, do we get another chance through “works”? Does this open the door for the inclusion of non-Christians? No, says Wright, it doesn’t. In the first stage the covenant people are identified by their faith, and that is explicitly Christian faith. In the second stage, the final one, the ranks are winnowed further when works *in addition to* faith come into play. In describing the final judgment according to works Paul is not talking about the “moral pagan”: “These people are Christians” (*Justification*, p. 191). Wright does not state explicitly what becomes of those who fail to make the second cut, but those who will survive to participate in the new creation are exclusively Christians.

This effectively stands Paul on his head. Paul, whose life’s mission was to make the covenant inclusive, not restricted to one group or one faith only, now ends up creating another exclusive covenant group based on a specific belief. Wright makes this belief explicit in his article “New Perspectives on Paul” (2003) (available on his web site):

And we now discover that this declaration, this vindication, occurs twice. It occurs in the future, as we have seen, on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit – that is, it occurs on the basis of “works” in Paul’s redefined sense. And, near the heart of Paul’s theology, it occurs in the present as an anticipation of that future verdict, when someone, responding in believing obedience to the “call” of the gospel, *believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.* (emphasis added)

One must begin with faith, specifically belief, and after that one is judged on works. Does one come to this faith by free choice, or in some Calvinist sense is one pre-selected to receive the call of the Spirit? It would seem to be the latter, judging from Wright’s frequent mention of the role of the Spirit. But in either case the point is clear: the necessary qualification is that one “believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.” Only Christians are saved, and they are saved through their belief.

Thus one form of exclusivism has been replaced by another. There may be neither Jew nor Greek, but there is now Christian and non-Christian. It’s quite an irony: Christianity, which began as the endeavor to open the covenant faith to all people, has become another faith excluding members of other faiths. So how far have we progressed?

We hinted earlier that the New Perspective on Paul raises questions about his relevance for us today. If Paul’s major concern, overriding all others, was to include the Gentiles into the faith community, well, in the

era of a Gentile church that's a dead issue. If that's what Paul is really all about and he doesn't have much to say about the actual process by which faith casts out fear and brings us God's presence, then why pay him so much attention? Francis Watson sums this up in the first edition of his book *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), which is more in line with the New Perspective than his second edition:

In an age in which it was becoming increasingly difficult to talk meaningfully about God, it was believed that Paul's gospel would address us and challenge us as it had addressed and challenged Luther's contemporaries; this outweighed the need for careful investigation of the historical and sociological context of Paul's teaching about justification, law, and faith. But the real Paul is not the stranger of Protestant mythology, who was cast into the wilderness by a legalistic early Catholic church, and who returns to the church to preach his gospel anew in times of crisis. He is a stranger only in so far as his activity and teaching *belong to a unique and unrepeatable historical situation, in which the church was confronted for the first and only time in its history* with the possibilities either of remaining within the Jewish community, or of separation from that community. (Pp. 179-189, emphasis added)

Watson concludes:

When the early church accepted the Pauline letters as canonical, it asserted its belief in their permanent value as a normative guide to faith and conduct. That fundamental decision has been maintained by many modern New Testament scholars, who have held that Paul's theology transcends its original historical setting and is still of crucial significance for the modern understanding of God. But if the interpretation of Paul offered here is accepted, it is important to face the question: Can a Paul who devotes his energies to the creation and maintaining of sectarian groups hostile to all non-members, and especially to the Jewish community from which in fact they derived, still be seen as the bearer of a message with profound universal significance? Facing this question will mean that the permanent, normative value of Paul's theology will not simply be *assumed*, as is often the case at present. It must instead be *discussed* – and with genuine arguments, not with mere rhetorical appeals to the authority of the canon, the Reformers, or an *a priori*

Christology. Should Paul's thought still be a major source of inspiration for contemporary theological discussion? Or should it be rejected as a cul-de-sac, and should one seek inspiration elsewhere? (Pp. 180-181)

If Paul's all-consuming task was to bring Gentiles into the church, a task accomplished long ago, and if that's what his faith talk is really all about, then does he still have much to say to us today?

### 3. A Different Perspective

According to the commentary on Romans presented earlier, the answer is Yes. That is the conclusion of this third, or "different" perspective.

This commentary understands justification by faith differently from both the Old and the New Perspectives. It solves the logical and ethical problems inherited from those perspectives. It does so first by redefining some basic terms:

*The Christ:* The presence of the love that was present in Jesus (see commentary on 2:16). This is not love as the world loves. It is divine, non-self-interested love. It can be described but not completely captured by conceptual definition. One way of coming closer to it is to bring oneself into the life of Jesus as the Christ shone through him. If this love is present and active in one's own heart, then one is *in Christ* (see on 8:3).

*Faith:* This is more than belief; it is even more than placing one's trust and confidence in a person or a principle. *It is the awareness of the power of eternity itself.* It is knowing we are held by this power. It is the conviction of God's presence (see commentary on 3:25).

*Justification by faith:* The inner transformation, or changing of our hearts, that faith brings about in us. Faith "justifies" us or "makes us righteous" by giving us a new motivation: Christlike love, in which we fervently desire to participate, overpowers the human impulses of greed and fear. In Paul's language, the law of the Spirit conquers the law of sin and death (see commentary on 5:21).

The logical problem of justification is solved because justification by faith really does create a transformation of the individual, conforming one's thoughts and actions to God's will. The connection between the question of Romans 7 and the answer of Romans 8 is solid. There is no



condemnation for those who are in Christ because, in so far as they are in Christ, there is nothing to condemn. Love has become their governing power. God "condemned sin in the flesh" by showing how the power of self-transcending love could be present in a man of flesh and blood. Those who live according to the Spirit – who are so inspired by the example of Christ that they are infused with the love he showed – live in a different reality from those who live according to the flesh, the natural impulses of greed and fear. The former fulfill the "just requirement of the law"; the latter cannot submit to God's law and cannot please God. One could go on for the entire chapter: when read this way the rest of chapter 8 makes perfect sense. No complicated explanations are necessary about how all this can be true if someone else's righteousness is merely imputed to the depraved and undeserving, or about what all this has to do with simply being identified as a member of the new community of Christian Jews and Gentiles. "Righteousness" now really means something. It is neither imputed nor diluted; it is real. It should also be understood that "justification" in this sense – being made righteous – is a process and not a singular event that suddenly makes us perfect. As our faith grows, so does our "righteousness."

The ethical problem of justification is solved because this understanding of it does not define one group over against another. What matters is not what one believes, but whether Christlike love is one's governing motivation. Christians are fortunate in having the example of Christ. Without a good example it is very difficult to learn, and there is no better example in recorded history than the one Jesus gave us. But I know for a fact that saints exist in other traditions. I have known some of them.

Just one whom I will mention was Rabbi Simon Greenberg, before his death Vice Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. The love and hospitality he showed me after the tragic death of my first wife could have been the love of Christ himself, although as a rabbi, Dr. Greenberg would not have put it in those terms. Yet such love was present in him. He displayed a charitable attitude towards everyone, and selfless compassion when it was needed. When we can see not only a person's love but God's love in the love that person shows us, we can know the same love is present that was in Christ Jesus. And those people, of whatever background or whatever faith, are the members of the true Spiritual Community. In the light of the Christ, or of divine love, there is now truly neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Christian nor non-Christian. All forms of exclusivism are finally broken.

Now someone in the audience may object: Hold on! Aren't you reading into Paul many things he did not explicitly say? Of course I am.

Yet I believe that all of the above is implied in what Paul wrote. It might be time to consider the relationship between text and meaning.

The search for the “original,” literal meaning of the biblical text is like the search for the historical Jesus. There is no end to it. I remember once as a child trying to follow a rainbow to its very end. I never got there. Same thing here. It cannot be otherwise. The text of the Bible is too elliptical, and the words have too many possible meanings, for anyone to say with absolute certainty, “This is precisely what it meant when it was written.”

I have read enough biblical scholarship to appreciate the way scholars work. They have an admirable proficiency with the Bible’s language – that is a prerequisite for their profession. But that alone does not get them to the meaning of the text. To get there they must make decisions, and they do so all the time: decisions about which of several possible definitions of a word to choose, how best to render into English a language whose thought-structure is very different, how to apply what we know about history and culture to illuminate passages that remain obscure. And even all this is not enough to arrive at a definitive meaning. Bible scholars constantly appeal to plausibility to fill in the gaps that remain even after the application of all relevant analytical tools. And what is plausible to one critic is implausible to another. On top of even that, there will always remain ambiguities in the original language that may never be finally resolved, permitting a variety of interpretations. As one notorious example, the great debate over *pistis Christou*, whether it means “faith *in* Christ” or “faith *of* Christ,” continues, since the Greek can bear either rendering. Another example, also unresolved: Does “law” in Paul mean ceremonial law, moral law, or both? Old Perspectivists tend to say it means moral law. New Perspectivists tend to say it means the distinctively Jewish ceremonial law. I would say it means both, since when an educated Jew like Paul speaks of the Torah, he means both. Also, if one leaves out the moral component, then Paul’s statements about the law, sin, and death become incomprehensible. Still, there are accomplished scholars on all sides of this issue.

It therefore comes as no surprise that often one finds two critics of the same text, for example N.T. Wright and John Piper, digging deep into the original Greek and coming up with diametrically opposite interpretations. *All* scholars and commentators make decisions about meanings and read into the words their own understanding of what they mean. Otherwise they wouldn’t be able to do their work.

At this point one might get the impression I am espousing some sort of interpretive relativism, by which all possible meanings of a text are equal and therefore the text really has no meaning at all. As Paul

would say, By no means! Some types of scholarship are better than others, some scholars' grasp of the language is better than others, and hopefully as the debates continue the better ones will become apparent. But the process cannot stop there; there is more to a text's meaning than this. We will need some additional criteria.

Before identifying these criteria, let's consider one illustrative example of what "meaning" means.

"The Christ" literally means "the anointed one." In ancient Israel, kings were anointed with oil before taking office. This symbolized divine designation for the post. Later on, the term became applied to the Messiah, the future king of Israel. Christians use the term to describe Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believe to be this Messiah. Thus the meaning of the term slowly evolved. But the evolution did not stop there. The term "Christ" came to mean much more than "anointed" or "Messiah" and came to refer to the qualities we associate with Jesus himself. Thus "Christlike" does not mean "soaked with oil," nor does it mean "Messianic." It means being like Jesus Christ, possessing the quality of boundless, suffering love. Some scholars believe the word "Christ" in the New Testament should always be translated "Messiah." But then shades of meaning would be lost. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) just isn't the same as "So if anyone is in the Messiah there is a new creation," nor as "So if anyone is in the anointed, there is a new creation." Which one of these best captures Paul's meaning in English?

There can, of course, be disagreement about that question. It may depend on what one believes Paul intended. It may also depend on what one believes the text conveys even beyond Paul's conscious intention. That is the beauty of any inspired text: it carries layers of meaning. And if that text is originally in another language, no one translation is going to capture all those layers.

So translation is not arbitrary, and not all translations are equal. My commentary is not an attempt at literal translation (as if such a thing were even possible). *Like every commentary, it is an interpretation.* This interpretation of the text renders "the Christ" in a meaning similar to and extending the last meaning mentioned above: as the presence of the love that was found in Christ Jesus. I also believe this commentary is faithful to the spirit of the text, and that in any case Paul's original, conscious intention cannot be ascertained with certainty, for all the reasons already given. The text does express Paul with all his human flaws and limitations; nevertheless, it is also greater than Paul.

So just how can we identify permissible interpretations and screen out bad ones? Which derived meanings of a text can be considered meaningful? I would like to propose the following criteria, phrased as questions rather than rigid guidelines:

1. Does the meaning respect the words themselves, not stretching them beyond recognition?
2. Does the meaning yielded convey an eternal, healing truth?
3. Would we have arrived at this meaning without the text at hand?

A proposed meaning need not answer “yes” to all these criteria, but if it answers “no” to any one of them, then either the proposed meaning or the text itself (or possibly both) is questionable.

One consequence of this approach is that the meaning of a text is not necessarily unique. A scriptural text has a literal meaning (often recoverable only by successive approximations) and a spiritual meaning (which is at least in some measure “intended,” even if not consciously, by the text itself). The literal meaning is known with the aid of analytical tools at the disposal of the Bible scholar. The spiritual meaning is known by its healing power.

The “Different Perspective” presented here does not, of course, replace projects like the New Perspective, one of whose aims is to uncover the primary, literal meaning of the text to the extent it is possible to do so. The Old Perspective is another matter. New Perspective scholars have shown convincingly that the Old Perspective reads the text of Romans through Luther’s theology. This theology is first assumed, and then “proven” by an exegesis of Romans based on that assumption. The Old Perspective has had unfortunate consequences. Its single-minded emphasis on *sola fide* and *sola gratia* has led to a faith that elevates creed above morality. Its caricature of Judaism as a degenerate religion whose members boast arrogantly of their own merit in order to influence God has fueled anti-Semitic stereotypes. Its rigid notions about who is saved and who isn’t have spread fear and intolerance in the name of a loving Christ. A reexamination of these views, which the New Perspective has demanded, has been long overdue.

The New Perspective, despite its limitations, has made many significant contributions. It has identified and clarified the effects of Lutheran theology on the popular understanding of Paul. It restores a needed historical perspective to the study of the biblical texts. And it attempts to correct the distorted picture of Judaism that has been firmly fixed in much of traditional Christian theology. On this last point James

Dunn has been particularly helpful and his writings on the subject deserve attention.

The main concern of the “Different Perspective” presented here is healing. Theology in general executes its task successfully only when its results contribute to the healing of our spiritual wounds and to our reconciliation with God. The present perspective seeks to understand just how faith makes us whole, what it means to be part of the Spiritual Community, and exactly how the assertions in Romans 8 answer the questions in Romans 7. It seeks to understand the connection between the letters Paul wrote and the gospel Jesus preached. It shows how the unique love Jesus demonstrated becomes the basis for the transformation of our hearts that Paul calls faith and by which we are “justified,” that is, made to conform to the righteousness of God (*dikaiosyne theou*). This linkage between faith and righteousness becomes something we can understand, something demonstrable, which does not need mystical concepts like “imputation” to explain it. By meditating on the love of Christ, of which the Gospels provide many examples, and by internalizing faith as a change of heart wrought by this love and giving us the presence of the eternal, we can find healing for our souls. This requires our commitment. It is a way of life. This is what it means to “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4), enabling us to inherit the blessings Paul enumerates in the verses that follow.

As to our three criteria, the Different Perspective satisfies the first: it grows out of the language used by Paul. It satisfies the second: it expresses a healing truth. As to the third, after years of “wrestling with Romans” I am grateful to have received this commentary, because without Paul’s words I would not have come upon these insights. The conclusions of the commentary are in the text. I did not put them there. Paul gave them to me. I believe they are one legitimate layer of the meaning of what he said.

### **Completing the Task: The Meaning of “Messiah”**

This Different Perspective is also distinct from the Old and from the New in its understanding of what it means to say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. There is no need to invoke an “inaugurated eschatology” that has no observable traces in a still unredeemed world. Jesus is the Messiah in that he gave us the vision of the New Creation and the plan for how to get there. He did everything short of performing our part of the task for us. He set the example of non-self-interested love, and encouraged us to follow it. Love transcending the borders of self brings us to the divine, and brings the divine to us. Each of us, by

practicing this love, can by the grace of God help to build the New Creation. This is how the Messianic era will be established – no further prophecy is needed. Jesus completed the line of Hebrew prophecy by showing us how God’s promise is fulfilled. No other prophet can add to what he gave us.

Of course there is still a great distance between the vision and its realization. This is where Paul helps us. Paul knew that, try as hard as we might, we are still often defeated by our own good intentions. Selfish motives contaminate our actions even when we try our best to do good. Paul’s great insight is that faith can accomplish what the human will cannot. Faith, in the deep sense of transformation of the heart by Christlike love, makes us workers for the Kingdom. The connection between true faith and true righteousness becomes palpable. This connection is the heart that loves the way Christ loved, and the way God loves. In this love is born a faith that *does* transform the individual and that fulfills God’s righteousness in a way that requires no additional explanation.

A heart inspired by the love Christ exemplified will lead us to a righteous spirit and, possibly, if enough of us practice it, to the Messianic age. We are always pilgrims on the path – our practice need not be perfect since as human beings we are not perfect, but “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” If we are indeed living in a time of “inaugurated eschatology,” it can only mean this: that we live in between knowing the plan and bringing it to completion, that we can work towards completing it by treating each other as if the Kingdom already existed, and that this task, too hard for the human will, becomes possible through a faith that grows from a heart changed completely by love.

Therefore a more succinct expression of this Different Perspective might be found in an emendation of the following passage from N.T. Wright:

If anyone is in Christ – new creation! Not “Cogito ergo sum” but “Amor, ergo sum”: I am loved, therefore I am. That is where Paul is in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and above all Romans. (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 173)

If we change this to “*Amo, ergo sum*”: I love, therefore I am,” then we find our Different Perspective encapsulated. Or, more explicitly, “I love as Christ loved; therefore my faith brings me the presence of God.” That, to me, is the great and timeless message of Paul’s Letter to the Romans.