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THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS

by JOHN WOOD

STIMULATED by a remark in a book by Professor C. F. D. Moule, Mr. Wood (formerly Tutor in Moorlands Bible College) gives fresh attention to the purpose of Romans, and suggests that while Paul's immediate purpose in writing was to prepare the Christians of Rome for his projected visit to their city, his ultimate purpose was to check antinomian and separatist tendencies within the church.

IN a recent series of television lectures, Professor C. F. Evans called attention yet again to the problem of Romans. "Why it was written remains something of a mystery", he said. Its apparent purpose—to prepare the Roman Christians for his intended visit to them, does not really explain the complicated nature of Paul's letter, nor does it take into account the peculiar circumstances of the Church which are introduced in this letter in a somewhat oblique manner.¹

It is never difficult to perceive the providential purpose behind the letter, since Romans has long been a fount of spiritual renewal within the Christian Church. It was through study of its truth that Martin Luther came to feel himself "reborn" and admitted "through open doors into paradise" (1516). And Tyndale said of it that it is the "principal and most excellent part of the New Testament" (1526). It was through the reading of Luther's preface to the letter that Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" on May 24, 1738. And in the present century, it was in Paul's letter to the Romans that Karl Barth found the word of God for his disillusioned heart. His subsequent commentary (1917), so filled with "a joyful sense of discovery", has profoundly influenced subsequent theology.

But what was Paul's immediate purpose in penning this letter? What factors influenced both the form and content of it? What were the pressing circumstances that demanded this epistle with all its rich theological argument?

I

It has been argued that the letter was written to set out the apostle's theology with greater fullness than had been possible in

¹ *The Apostle Paul*, by C. F. Evans, Morna Hooker, J. C. O'Neill (B.B.C. Publications, 1966), p. 15.

the shorter and more urgent letters written previously. It reads less like an occasional letter, and more like a theological treatise. It is argued that Paul faced unknown hazards in his journey to Jerusalem (A.D. 57 or 58), and therefore decided to set out his theology for posterity,² and to deposit it with the Church at Rome which he shortly intended to visit, and which he realized would become strategic for future Christian activity.³

On this view, Romans is more like one of Seneca's formal epistles where his main philosophical and religious ideas are communicated under the guise of an ordinary letter. Other writings of Paul's can be paralleled by letters discovered among the papyri unearthed in Egypt towards the end of last century. They are racy, readable personal pieces of correspondence—quite like any other letters which were sent in the first century A.D., except that the extraordinary life and vitality created by the Gospel made Paul's style glow with a new force and splendour. But Romans moves at a steadier and more stately pace. It comes closer to being a reasoned and logical discourse than any other of Paul's letters.

However, there are considerable weaknesses in this view, and possibly few scholars would be found today defending it. The similarity to Seneca's letters is merely apparent and never real. The reader of Seneca's epistles soon becomes aware that the letter style is "contrived". The deliberately rhetorical style, the lack of warm direct address, and the evident artificiality of the letter form, set Seneca's epistles in contrast to the real warm personal writing of Paul in Romans. The epistolary form of Romans is no artificial device to propagate the apostle's theology. Romans is, in fact, a *letter*, no matter how much like an *epistle* it may seem to us these long centuries later. It is full of personal allusions, autobiographical outpourings of the heart, close instruction of particular people in the Church at Rome, and definite plans for the apostle's future activities. As is usual in Paul, there are digressions, parentheses and unfinished sentences—yes, even in Romans!⁴ Moreover, there is much in Paul's theology which finds little expression in this particular letter—especially his detailed teaching on the Universal Church and the eucharist. As a theological legacy it is extremely disappointing.

Then too, if Paul feared that he might not survive his visit to

² See Sanday & Headlam, I.C.C., p. xlii.

³ See E. F. Scott, *Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (S.C.M., 1947), p. 20.

⁴ There are examples of anacoluthon in Rom. 12: 2 and 16: 25-27. See Rom. 3: 2ff. for a typical Pauline digression. The sentence commenced in 2: 17 is never completed!

Jerusalem, he has not breathed a word of it to his amanuensis Tertius (16: 22)! Paul's epistle to the Romans is not trimmed in black. The Apostle's gospel is not *bequeathed* in this letter; it is proclaimed and argued! As E. F. Scott said, Paul here writes as a man in mid-career.⁵

II

Today it is increasingly felt that Romans is a real letter written for a genuine purpose. Explicitly, Paul wrote to prepare for his future visit to the Capital, to ensure a welcome among the Christians there who did not know him or might be suspicious of him,⁶ to explain his attitude towards the preaching of the Gospel, and to enlist support for his projected Spanish mission (15: 28). The urgency of his task, and the strategic nature of Rome as the throbbing heart of the Ancient World, made Paul's purpose of considerable importance, and demanded that his preparation be particularly thorough.

This being so, however, we have still to explore the reason for the particular kind of appeal Paul makes in this letter. It seems odd to write a closely-reasoned theological argument of this sort just to prepare for a future evangelistic effort—even though that mission was of such enormous importance. We have no other example of Paul adopting such a policy so far as the other great cities of the Empire were concerned. Nor, on this view, is a great deal of Romans specially relevant.

A. H. McNeile's comment to the effect that Romans was "a comprehensive apologia for Universal Religion over against Jewish Nationalism"⁷ finds support in the writings of other scholars.⁸ But again it fails to account for much in Romans that does not square with this motive. An exposition of the universality of the gospel, addressed to a predominantly Gentile audience, would not normally include an attack on antinomianism, a personal testimony to the powerlessness of the Mosaic law, and an appeal for Gentile Christians to treat their strict brethren from among the Jews with courtesy. Moreover, the important section in chapters 9 to 11 goes by unexplained on this view.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁶ E. F. Scott, *Ibid.*, p. 21; A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 407.

⁷ A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (O.U.P., 1927), p. 137.

⁸ E.g. C. H. Dodd in the Moffatt Commentary (Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), p. xxv.

Much of Romans has a Jewish audience in view. Indeed, Paul's entire argument is developed by means of Old Testament texts which were extremely meaningful for Jewish recipients. It is true that Paul writes as Apostle to the Gentiles, magnifying his office⁹ and seeking fruit among the Romans as among other Gentiles.¹⁰ Yet he devotes considerable time and thought to what H. L. Ellison has recently called "The Mystery of Israel".¹¹ Far from opposing Jewish nationalism here, Paul pays attention to the whole question of Israel's position in the economy of God. The question which springs to mind as we read these chapters is, "why, in planning a Gentile mission, does Paul discuss at length the Jewish problem?" Why this developed apology for the place of Israel "after the flesh" in the purposes of God? And why does Paul find it necessary to urge Gentile Christians not to continue boasting over their Jewish fellow-believers?¹²

III

That Romans is a letter rather than a formal epistle must surely be the verdict of any careful reader. But that its purpose was merely to prepare for Paul's wider work in the West seems somewhat inadequate.

In the commentary by Franz Leenhardt on Romans, however, there is a further line of reasoning which helps to bring us nearer to the heart of Paul's intentions. Professor Leenhardt points out that while the word *ekklesia* does not appear in the book at all, in fact the argument of the letter everywhere presupposes the existence and importance of "the Church". Paul here preaches the gospel which is addressed to the Jew first and also to the Greek, and which therefore unites men together in a realization of guilt and an acceptance of God's free gift of eternal life.¹³ The gospel exposes the sordid state of society which has suppressed the truth about God,¹⁴ and humbles the pride of the superior Jew who boasts in his knowledge of the Mosaic law.¹⁵ And in bringing men under the rule of grace, the gospel enables them to live above the law.¹⁶

⁹ Rom. 11: 13.

¹⁰ Rom. 1: 13.

¹¹ H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel* (Paternoster Press, 1966): an exposition of Romans 9-11.

¹² In 11: 18 the verb is a present continuous imperative.

¹³ Note how the theme of unity between Jew and Gentile dominates the following: 1: 16; 2: 9, 10; 3: 9, 22, 29; 4: 9, 16, 17; 9: 24; 10: 12; 15: 8, 9; 15: 26, 27.

¹⁴ Rom. 1: 18-32.

¹⁵ Rom. 2: 1-29.

¹⁶ Rom. 3: 31.

It does not render the Jewish religious heritage unnecessary, or imply that the law is in any way wrong (except when men seek to make it the means of salvation).¹⁷ But it proclaims a life and power in the Spirit which enables a man to keep the good and holy will of God as expressed in the law.¹⁸ The fact that God's free offer of justification is addressed to all men, irrespective of race, does not mean that He has abandoned His ancient people: the Jews.¹⁹ Rather, it is God's will to provoke Israel to seek after the righteousness it has lost through the rejection of Jesus.²⁰ Eventually, Paul declares, the long-standing covenant of God with His people will be honoured to the full, and so all Israel shall be saved.²¹ The Gentile Christians at Rome should not therefore continue to boast over their Jewish brethren who seemed to be small in number, conservative in outlook, and slow to broaden their horizons.²² They must remember that they owe their standing in faith to the events which first took their rise among the Jews.²³ And they must therefore "welcome" their brothers as befits the true children of God.²⁴

Most commentaries on Romans assume that Paul's argument ends with chapter 8; and that everything which follows is by way of digression or deduction.²⁵ In fact, Leenhardt has shown that Romans 9 to 11 lie at the heart of the epistle, since they deal with the special problem which concerned the Roman Church, namely:

How can the young Church feel conscious of belonging to the old trunk of which Abraham is the stem, if the new dispensation develops outside the framework of the new people of God?

Romans is the answer to this perennial problem as to the real connection between Israel "after the flesh" with its law and covenant, and the new people of God who by faith in Christ have received the free gift of eternal life. Its aim is therefore to demonstrate the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, the law and the gospel, the Jew and the Gentile, law-keeping and grace, ethical responsibility and spiritual liberty.

¹⁷ Rom. 6: 1, 2; 6: 15; 7: 7; 7: 13.

¹⁸ Rom. 8: 1-4. Cf. Augustine's dictum: "The law is given that grace may be sought. Grace is given that the law may be kept".

¹⁹ See especially 11: 1.

²⁰ Rom. 10: 21; 11: 14.

²¹ Rom. 11: 25-36.

²² Rom. 11: 18; 14: 1, 5-12, 13ff.

²³ Rom. 11: 18; 14: 13.

²⁴ Rom. 15: 7.

²⁵ See Sanday and Headlam, p. 225, in introducing chapters 9-11: "St. Paul has now finished his main argument".

In this connection, however, we should not be misled by the very real similarity of Romans to Galatians, since the immediate purpose of each was different from the other. As C. F. D. Moule has commented in his recent book *The Birth of the New Testament*, in Galatians Paul attacks legalism, but in Romans the foe is antinomianism.²⁶ The atmosphere of Romans is vastly different from that of Galatians—even though the argument is almost identical. A genuine historical development has taken place between the writing of the two letters. No longer is Paul wrestling with the insidious invasion of Judaizing theology as in Galatians. Now he is faced with a church predominantly Gentile, liable to lose its sense of indebtedness to the Jewish people and its awareness that God's ancient callings are "without repentance".

We should not overlook the fact that Romans was written at a time when Paul was obsessed with the desire to take a love-offering from Gentile Christians to the Christian Jews at Jerusalem.²⁷ So great was his desire to cement relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian Church, that he consented to fulfill a Jewish vow of purification at the Temple of Jerusalem and to pay the expenses of four other Christians to do likewise.²⁸ The man who earlier had ruthlessly opposed legalism as undermining the very truth of the Christian gospel, now lovingly opposed antinomianism and separatism carried out under the banner of "Christian liberty".

In Romans this concern appears and re-appears. Jews and Gentiles alike are debtors to grace.²⁹ Boasting has therefore no place in the Christian community.³⁰ The law was all part of God's preparatory purpose—and it must not be thoughtlessly tossed away, or tenaciously held in excessive veneration. Gentiles who believe, claim Abraham as their father—just as Jews by nature do.³¹ Jew and Gentile alike find life through grace—and not through legalism. At present, Gentiles have their place in the purposes of God. But they must not continue to boast over the Jews, for God yet intends to bring them to their promised destiny. Let

²⁶ C. F. D. Moule: *The Birth of the New Testament* (A. and C. Black, 1962), p. 51: "In Galatians there is need for strenuous defence of Christian freedom against Judaizing claims; by the time Romans 14 is written, the scruples of the Jewish Christian (as a 'weak' person) have to be protected against harsh treatment".

²⁷ Acts 20: 4; 1 Cor. 16: 1ff.; 2 Cor. 8; 9; Rom. 15: 25ff.

²⁸ Acts 21: 17-26.

²⁹ Rom. 1: 16 *et al.*

³⁰ Rom. 3: 27.

³¹ Rom. 4: 16.

liberty therefore be controlled by love.³² The strict Jew must not be censorious, and the emancipated Christian must not be provocative.³³ Each must welcome the other in the Lord, and live only to please God—just as Jesus did.³⁴

IV

Our view of Romans, therefore, is that Paul was seeking to ensure that the Christian Church did not tear free from its Jewish roots. He wanted to preserve the Jewish heritage within the Christian community. And to this end he opposed antinomianism, radicalism and separatism.

But can this view of Paul's purpose be successfully defended from the book as a whole? I believe it can. In particular, it seems to me that the great number of rhetorical questions used in Romans, give us a clue as to the kind of person Paul had in mind when he wrote this letter. As Bultmann showed many years ago, much of Romans is written in the style of a Greek diatribe, in which questions about the writer's argument are put into the mouth of an imaginary objector. By studying these questions in Romans, therefore, we can gain a fair idea of the kind of audience Paul had in view when he wrote. Thus we gain a vital clue to the actual purpose of the whole letter. This is particularly true of the rhetorical questions answered so abruptly by Paul with his typical *mē genoito*, "Heaven forbid"!

Two of these questions concern antinomianism (6: 1, 15). Having said that God's grace shines all the more clearly against the dark background of our sin, Paul's objector asks whether we should not therefore continue to sin so that grace might continue to abound! (5: 20; 6: 1). But as Paul points out, such behaviour would be a denial of that very grace through which we died to sin so that we might live for God. Again, having said that we now live under the rule of divine grace and not under the law, Paul's questioner asks whether we should not therefore ignore the legal

³² Rom. 14: 19-21.

³³ Rom. 14: 3.

³⁴ Rom. 15: 1ff. No less than in Ephesians, the main theme of Romans is the unity of Jew and Gentile in the fellowship of the Church. If it is countered that such an explanation of Romans comes near to the position advocated last century by F. C. Baur, the point is conceded. But then Baur's position was wrong—not because he made the Gentile-Jewish problem the chief purpose of *Romans*, but because he made it the chief purpose of every other letter Paul ever wrote—as though Paul had only one hobby-horse which he rode through every sermon he delivered and every epistle he wrote!

code altogether and live in complete freedom (6: 15). To this Paul replies that absolute freedom is a myth. It is true that we are free from the legal code. But we have become enslaved to the Living Christ (6: 18). So we dare not live in a careless antinomian way.

Paul's objector is taking Paul's logic to its ultimate absurd conclusion. In reply Paul is driven to defend the law. This is particularly so in the next two rhetorical questions in which it is pointed out: first, that the law seems to *provoke* sin instead of preventing it (thus implying that the law is sinful); and second, that while Paul may defend the law as being "holy, just and good", the law does in fact seem to produce an *evil* result (7: 5, 7, 13). The drift of the argument is clear. Paul's objector is bent on repudiating the claims of the law. Paul himself seeks to show that while we cannot be saved by law-keeping, the old law of God given to Israel still has its part to play.³⁵ It *does* provoke sin in the heart as Paul himself discovered first as a young Jew just becoming aware of the law (7: 9) and then as an immature Christian still seeking to become holy by law-keeping but finding instead only defeat and despair (7: 14ff.). But the fault lies not in the holy law of God, but in the sinful soul of man. The blame for this kind of situation rests fairly and squarely with the sinful nature within—and not with the holy law without. It is the indwelling principle of sin which uses the good law of God in this utterly perverse way so that we are driven to go on sinning even though our best desires urge us to seek goodness and godliness.

One is inclined to ask why Paul should find it so necessary to defend the law so vigorously. The answer must be, that Paul continued to see value in the rich Jewish heritage which a now predominantly Gentile Church possessed. He is countering the attitude of the radical Gentile Christian who wants to break away from all things Jewish within the Church, and is using Paul's arguments to further his opinions. The apostle finds it necessary to refute this wrong conclusion from his premises. Antinomianism is contrary to the gospel, and for Gentiles to break away from Jews and all things Jewish in the Church, is a denial of that grace which binds Jew and Gentile together in Christ. There is still value in being a Jew "after the flesh" (3: 1, 2; 9: 1ff.), and the law still has its part to play in the life of the Christian (8: 4).

All this is underlined in the next two rhetorical questions answered by Paul's sonorous *mē genoito* (11: 1, 11). The Gentile

³⁵ In his exposition of justification here in Romans, Paul not only shows that this saving righteousness of God is manifested *apart* from the law; he also shows that it operates *in accordance with the law* (3: 21).

Christians at Rome must not gloat over the Jewish people for Israel's fall is not final since the purposes of God are irrevocable (11 : 29). The divine election will yet achieve its goal. There is still a future for the physical descendants of Abraham (11 : 31). The true olive branches will yet be grafted back in and so all Israel will be saved. Meanwhile the Christian community must compass within itself both Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, foolish and wise alike (1 : 16, 14).

Colchester.