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ROMANS

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INTRODUCTION

Contents

Paul's letter to Christians in the powerful city of Rome expands on the customary letter opening (identification of the writer and the audience, 1:1, 7) with a brief summary of the gospel itself (1:2–6). The gospel concerns Jesus Christ, who is both a physical descendant of David and a powerful son of God, and through whom Paul's work among the Gentiles has been authorized. The thanksgiving that follows (1:8–12) reveals that Paul himself has not yet been to Rome, although he knows the reputation of believers there. Paul also specifies that his work is among the Gentiles ("both to Greeks and to barbarians," 1:13–14). With 1:16–17, the introduction culminates in an initial statement of the letter's overall argument: In the gospel God acts with power to save all human beings, first Jews and then also Greeks. If the gospel reveals God's salvation, it also reveals God's "wrath," that is, why that salvation is needed. In 1:18–3:20 Paul relentlessly argues that all human beings, without exception, are sinful in that they rebel against the very power and priority of God. The sin of Gentiles (i.e., all persons who are not Jews) consists of their refusal to acknowledge God. Even the advantage of God's gifts to the Jewish people does not change the fact that they, along with Gentiles, are "under the power of sin" (3:9).

In 3:21 Paul returns to unpack the central point he has already introduced in 1:16–17. Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, God reveals God's own righteousness and thereby reclaims humanity from the deadly grip of sin.

Since this act of salvation is God's doing, human beings have no right to boast of their own accomplishments (3:21–31). Like Abraham and Sarah (Rom. 4), who could not imagine the possibility of a child born in their old age, humanity finds that God has not only raised Jesus from the dead but has made right those who are ungodly (i.e., everyone). To explain the extravagance of God's act of reconciliation, Paul takes up a comparison between Adam and Christ in chapter 5. Both lives affect every human being, yet Adam's act of rebellion ushers sin and death into the world, while Christ's act of righteousness inaugurates a new and gracious life of reconciliation. In this new life the Spirit of God rules in place of sin, and the Spirit empowers hope even in the face of suffering and pain. Indeed, by means of the Spirit, believers see on the horizon God's final act of salvation for the whole of creation (Rom. 8).

Paul's bold statements about God's unfathomable generosity prompt some predictable questions. First, if God justifies sinners (i.e., makes things right with them), does that mean in effect that God is actually encouraging sin? The answer is an emphatic no, because God's justification means freedom from sin and freedom for a new obedience (6:1–7:6). Second, does this gospel of God's free grace mean that the law of Moses is evil? Paul insists that the law is a good gift from God, but sin is so powerful that it can make use even of God's holy law in order to bring about death (7:7–25). Third, since most Jews do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, does God reject Israel and thereby reveal God's own faithlessness to the ancient

covenant? Chapters 9–11 strenuously deny this conclusion, insisting instead that God is faithful and that Israel's final salvation remains secure in God's hands.

The call to transformation in 12:1–2 marks an important shift in the letter, as Paul takes up explicitly the implications of the gospel of God for daily life in community. Chapters 12 and 13 address the relationships between Christians and other human beings, as well as the relationships between Christians and the governing authorities. The next section, 14:1–15:13, addresses relationships among Christians, with the behavior of Christ as the example of an active acceptance of the "other." Paul concludes the letter with comments about his own plans and his need for support from believers at Rome (15:14–33), followed by an extended set of personal greetings (Rom. 16). These personal greetings seem out of place in a letter to a city Paul has never visited. Because the letter apparently did circulate in ancient times without these greetings, an earlier generation of scholars suggested that chapter 16 originally belonged to another letter. Acts 18:2–3 places Prisca and Aquila (mentioned in Rom. 16:3) in Rome earlier, however, raising the possibility that they may have been among those banned from Rome by Claudius (see below) and may have met Paul during their exile. If Paul knew only a few such individuals, he may have referred to each one in order to reinforce his slender ties with Roman Christians.

Occasion and Purpose

Students of Romans are deeply divided about Paul's reasons for writing this particular letter and what he hoped it would accomplish. Certain features of Romans distinguish it from Paul's other letters and make it difficult to understand why the letter was written. As the longest of Paul's letters (thus its place at the beginning of the collection of letters), Romans is also the only one addressed to a church Paul did not found. By contrast with the heated polemical tone that characterizes portions of the Corinthian correspondence, Galatians, and Philippians (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 12:11–13; Gal. 3:1; Phil. 3:2–4), the language of Romans seems cool and dispassionate. Here Paul offers a more sustained, careful account of his own positions and makes little clear reference to the church in Rome. These distinctive features prompted

earlier generations of scholars to identify Romans as a summary of Paul's thought, unlike his other letters that were written to address specific communities and their problems. There are two major problems with reading Romans as a summary of Paul's thought: (1) Romans has little to say about some practices that are important in his other letters (such as baptism and the Lord's Supper), which makes it unlikely that Paul intends this as a reflective summary of the gospel; and (2) it seems highly improbable that Paul (or any other Christian of the first century) had either the leisure or the inclination to write a theological essay without a concrete pastoral goal in view.

The earlier consensus that Romans is something like Paul's magnum opus has broken down, replaced by a bewildering array of suggestions about the aims of this letter. The suggestions can be divided into two general categories: (1) those that see in Paul's own situation a reason to seek the help of believers in Rome, and (2) those that see within the church in Rome a problem that Paul feels compelled to address, making it in fact a pastoral letter like the others. Within the first category, some scholars argue that Paul's upcoming trip to Jerusalem dominates his thinking. As 15:25–29 indicates, Paul is preparing to go to Jerusalem, where he will present Jewish Christians in that city with money that has been offered for them by Gentile Christians. Although a famine may have created the need for this offering (see Acts 11:27–28), Paul understands its acceptance by Jerusalem Christians as acceptance of his ministry among Gentiles and, more important, as acceptance of the unity of Jew and Gentile. For that reason, he writes to Roman Christians to seek their prayers on behalf of his trip to Jerusalem.

A second approach within this same category sees the occasion for the letter in Paul's mission to Spain. According to 15:22–29, Paul anticipates traveling from Jerusalem to Rome and then to Spain. For this new venture, he seeks the support, presumably material as well as spiritual, of Roman Christians. The letter then functions to introduce Paul and his understanding of the gospel, in the hope that Christians in Rome will be willing to lend their support to Paul's project. On this reading, the restrained style of Romans reflects the fact that Paul is not involved in polemic, and the content primarily introduces Paul's thought in an effort

to secure the needed spiritual and financial support for his work.

The second category, those approaches that understand Paul to be addressing some problem within the church in Rome, takes its starting point from an incident related by the Roman historian Suetonius, who writes that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome on account of a disturbance caused by a certain "Chrestus" (Claudius 4). Since "Chrestus" is almost certainly to be identified with "Christos," or Christ, this reference may mean that conflict broke out within the large Jewish population of Rome over the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. As a result, Claudius probably expelled Jewish Christians in 49 CE, leaving the Christian community in Rome overwhelmingly Gentile. With Claudius's death in 54 CE, the expulsion was revoked and Jewish Christians returned to Rome. Conflict followed as Jewish Christians expected to resume leadership within the Christian community, while Gentile Christians saw no reason to yield to their returning sisters and brothers. According to this scenario, Paul's letter addresses a group of Christians whose conflict runs along ethnic lines (although some Jews may well have identified themselves with Gentile points of view and vice versa). The letter sets out to foster the reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The content of the letter then is understood to be intimately connected with the situation itself. Paul's restrained style reflects the fact that he has not yet been to Rome and has no relationship on which to draw.

One striking feature of this ongoing debate about the occasion of Romans is the degree to which advocates for various positions build their arguments on different parts of the letter. Those who see the occasion of the letter in Paul's own situation emphasize his comments about his itinerary in the letter "frame," the opening and closing remarks (1:1–15; 15:14–33). By contrast, those who see the letter addressing conflict in the church in Rome stress the "body" of the letter, especially the sections that deal with conflict between Jews and Gentiles. Every proposal regarding the purpose of Romans struggles to account for the relationship between the letter frame and the content of the letter.

Certainty regarding the purpose of a letter as complex as Romans remains unlikely, but a few conclusions are helpful for readers. Paul

writes to a congregation of strangers. Even if he knows some important individuals within the congregation (16:3–16), he must carefully identify himself and the major contours of the gospel he preaches. As Paul writes, he is planning an immediate visit to Jerusalem, where he intends to present a gift of aid for Christians in that city and for which plan he seeks the prayerful support of Christians in Rome. Following that trip to Jerusalem, he will move on to Rome, where he hopes to "share the gospel," and then to Spain, where a new stage in his mission will begin (15:22–29). Given the content of the letter, with its emphasis on God's radical grace for all people, Jew and Gentile (1:16; 3:21–26), Paul may also have in mind a conflict within the church in Rome. Whether he knows that conflict rages at present or whether he anticipates it on the basis of his experience elsewhere is less clear. Based on the itinerary he identifies, the letter was probably written sometime between 55 and 57 CE, and probably from Corinth, since he refers to his host Gaius (16:23; see 1 Cor. 1:14) and also to the deacon and patron Phoebe, who is from the Corinthian port city of Cenchreae (16:1–2).

Theological Significance

Although Romans stands first among Paul's letters because of its length, one might argue that Romans belongs first because of its place in the history of Christian theology. Through the interpretations of such theologians and church leaders as Augustine, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth, Romans has exerted incalculable influence in Western Christian theology. The male dominance of that history of interpretation, taken together with the fact that this letter makes few direct references to women, might prompt the conclusion that Romans has little significance for the lives of women. Such a conclusion would be premature and indeed unfortunate, however, for within Paul's interpretation of the "righteousness of God" lies a powerful and liberating word for women and for men. When Paul refers to the righteousness of God, he refers both to a characteristic of God (that is, God is righteous) and to the implications of that characteristic for human beings (that is, in Jesus Christ God acts to free them from the death-dealing power of sin and to make them right before God). As Paul works through this notion in Romans, at least four themes emerge that have specific

implications for women: the "impartiality" of God, sin as rebellion against God, the radical nature of God's grace, and the solidarity of humankind with the rest of creation.

When Paul speaks of God as impartial, as he does in 2:11, he draws on a traditional Jewish conviction. To claim that God is impartial is not to say, as in contemporary American English, that God is merely evenhanded or that God is detached from human affairs, much less that God is indifferent. Instead, God's "impartiality" refers to the fact that God evaluates without reference to the usual human preoccupations with wealth, power, or religious status. In the Hebrew Bible, the claim that God is impartial forms a basis for admonitions to protect the widow, the orphan, the outsider (see, e.g., Deut. 10:17-19; 2 Chr. 19:7; Ps. 82:1-4). Paul radicalizes those convictions, applying them not only to Gentiles who live within Jewish communities but to all people without exception. If God is not partial to the rich over against the poor, to the child with a family over against the orphan, then God is also not partial to the Jew over against the Gentile. Without reference to any social or economic factor that usually conveys special privilege, God both judges and redeems each human being.

In Paul's argument in Romans, this insistence on God's impartiality serves to overturn traditional judgments about the greater value of Jews over against Gentiles, but women may find in it a significant way of addressing the value judgments that still elevate men over women or rank women by criteria of appearance, wealth, and status. To understand that God is impartial is to claim that all human beings have the same value in God's sight and, therefore, that humans are called to view one another in the same way. Having the same value does not imply "sameness," in the sense that all humanity is now to be one undifferentiated, homogenized "stew." Paul continues to assert the specific calling and history of Israel (Rom. 4:9-11); he also insists that Christians of different convictions respect and welcome one another (14:1-15:6).

A second theme of Romans is the universality of human sin. In 1:18-3:20 Paul argues explicitly that sin pervades human life. Paul refers to sin entering the world and pervading the world (5:12), treating sin as an actual power set over against God and enslaving humanity. Although sin manifests itself in human lives in a vast number of ways, ranging from the sexual

acts itemized in 1:26-27 to the religious pride of 2:17-24, Paul sees in each of these manifestations a single sin: humanity lives in rebellion against God (they "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator," 1:25).

What Romans offers women is an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which they participate in the human condition of rebellion against God. In some instances that rebellion may take the form of pride, perhaps a religious pride that presumes to know God's will and God's favor. In other instances, rebellion may take the form of low self-esteem, even a self-negation that implicitly denies that the creature in fact derives from God. Contrasts drawn in very generalized terms about the principal sin of men as pride and the principal sin of women as self-negation fail to perceive the depth of the situation Paul portrays. Such analyses—whether or not they are accurate—limit sin to the sphere of human relations. Paul would insist that whatever form sin takes, it arises from a common human rebellion against God, a desire indeed to replace God with the self.

A third theme of Romans is the radical nature of God's grace, which operates in the face of the universality of human rebellion against God. Again and again the letter drives at this theme. The Christ event reveals that God's righteousness is for all human beings (1:16-17) and that righteousness works through God's grace (3:24). God's grace has proved to be even more powerful than human sin, for the grace inaugurated by Jesus Christ has brought life for all people, releasing them from powers of sin and death (5:12-21). Even where God's grace at present appears to have failed, as in the case of part of Israel, the future triumph of God will reveal that God's grace has not failed; indeed, the future will reveal that God's grace is for all people (11:25-36).

This radical understanding of God's grace means that no human being can achieve God's favor or pleasure, for that favor is already abundantly granted in Jesus Christ; one need not work for what one already has. Especially for women, all too often socialized to believe that they must serve everyone else's needs and ignore their own, that they must constantly work to accomplish "enough" for their families or communities or employers or God, this statement comes as an instance of God's grace, a firm reminder that God's love is universal, irrevocable, and irresistible.

A fourth theme of Romans concerns the solidarity of humankind with the remainder of creation. This theme appears in only a small portion of the letter, yet its significance for women, particularly in the context of the current ecological crisis, warrants attention. Already in 1:18-23, Paul presupposes a connection between humanity and the remainder of creation. Because God is visible in the created world, the human race should have acknowledged God and given God thanks. This statement imagines a vital link between humanity, the remainder of creation, and the God who

creates. That link becomes explicit in 8:18-39, where Paul refers to the "eager longing" of "the creation," as it looks forward to God's final triumph. Creation "groans" along with human beings, who wait for their redemption. Unlike those dualistic philosophies and religious traditions that understand creation to be essentially evil, Paul here asserts a fundamental continuity between humanity and its earthly home. That continuity can stimulate not only a fresh appreciation of the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation but a commitment to treat creation as itself a gift of God.

COMMENT

Natural and Unnatural Acts (Rom. 1:18-32)

Within the context of his initial discussion of humanity's rebellion against God, Paul refers to the "degrading passions": "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" (1:26b-27). In order to understand what Paul means by this negative reference to homoerotic or same-sex intercourse, it is necessary to trace the logic of the passage. The passage fundamentally concerns the relationship between God and humanity; it is not primarily a passage intended to teach about sexual relations. It begins with an assertion of God's wrath against human sin (1:18); despite the clear evidence of creation, in which God is revealed to humanity, humankind has nevertheless refused to honor God (1:19-21). Indeed, human beings persist in making gods of themselves and denying the reality and power of God the creator (1:25). As a result of this rebellion ("therefore," 1:24; "for this reason," 1:26; "since they did not see fit to acknowledge God," 1:28), God handed human beings over to pursue their own desires ("God gave them up," 1:24, 26, 28). Those specific behaviors identified in 1:26-32, then, are the result of human sin.

Rather than identifying same-sex intercourse (or wickedness, evil, deceit, and so forth) as sin, Paul's analysis is that these actions stem from and are symptomatic of the defining human sin of denying the reality and power of God. That does not mean that same-sex intercourse serves in this passage merely as an example and that

lying or cheating would have suited Paul's purposes just as well as the example chosen. Since the passage as a whole revolves around the issue of creation (God as creator, humankind as created by God, the creature-creator relationship), Paul chooses same-sex intercourse, because, as he sees it, such activity runs counter to the creation of male and female and their roles in the ongoing created order. Since sexual relations between men and women are fundamental to God's creation, especially as the narratives of Genesis depict that creation, Paul regards sexual relations that contradict that pattern as unacceptable.

As contemporary readers grapple with conflicting information and volatile viewpoints regarding homosexuality and with the complicated question of how the Bible plays a role in contemporary decision making, it is important to acknowledge Paul's criticism forthrightly. That acknowledgment, however, needs to be contextualized in several ways. First, Paul did not have an understanding of homosexuality as a sexual orientation or sexual identity. In his context, it was assumed that sexual intercourse was the product of lust, and that lust run out of control would lead men to turn from women, their natural sexual partners, to men (as in Philo, *On Abraham* 135-36; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 7. 151-52). In other words, same-sex intercourse was not understood as an indication of a different sexual identity but as evidence of an intemperate sexual drive. Second, in common with his contemporaries, Paul regarded sexual activity as needing to conform to a "natural" hierarchy of the genders.

It was simply assumed that sexual penetration reflected and reinforced male superiority over females, so that a male who submitted to being penetrated had compromised his masculinity; female homoeroticism likewise was an assault on the "natural" gender hierarchy. Third, the context here is crucial. Romans 1:18–32 begins an extensive examination of the nature of human sin. Contemporary readers who are heterosexual and conclude from this passage that they are justified in judging or condemning persons who are homosexual will find themselves condemned in turn by Paul's sharp statement in 2:1: "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." If, in Paul's mind, same-sex relations are a symptom of rebellion against God, so is self-righteousness. To use this passage to justify the exclusion of persons who are homosexual would be the grossest distortion of Romans and its claims about God's radical and universal grace.

Circumcision and Uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25–29)

As elsewhere in his letters, Paul here employs the terms "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" to refer to Jews and Gentiles respectively. The use of these categories raises questions for women, since the categories are limited to males and would appear to exclude women from consideration. The issue that arises is whether Paul writes with only men in mind; that is, does the fact that he uses "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" mean that he thinks only of male experience? In one sense, the answer to that question is probably yes, to the extent that most people think primarily in terms of their own experience. Three factors weigh heavily against concluding that Paul writes only for and about men, however. First, he clearly understands women to be part of the community of faith in general and the Roman community in particular (see below on the significance of the names of women in Rom. 16). Second, for Paul and for many of his contemporaries, circumcision was perhaps the most important distinguishing characteristic of Judaism. Not only was circumcision associated with Abraham (see Gen. 17:9–14; Rom. 4:1–12), but during the Maccabean revolt it had become a significant

symbol of loyalty to the Jewish people, precisely because the Seleucids had forbidden the practice (see, e.g., 1 Macc. 1:41–64; 2 Macc. 6:1–11). Although Jews were not the only peoples who practiced circumcision, it was essential to their ethnic and religious identity. That historical circumstance probably means that the use of these terms is a shorthand way of referring to Jews in general, rather than only to male Jews. Third, in this particular part of the letter, Paul introduces a distinction between external signs and internal observance (2:27–29). The physical language of circumcision and uncircumcision supports this distinction and thus may have been chosen in part because of its utility in the argument rather than because it is gender specific.

Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12–21)

In this passage Paul introduces a convoluted set of comparisons between Adam and Christ. Women may sense their exclusion from this text, first, because of its use of the term "man" (5:12, 15–19) and, second, because of the male characters, Adam and Jesus Christ, through whom all of human history is being interpreted. Regarding the first concern, the Greek word *anthrōpos*, which refers to a human being or person rather than specifically to a male, appears consistently in this text. Presumably it is for that reason that translators of the NRSV revised some parts of the passage so that, for example, 5:12 reads, "and so death spread to all because all have sinned," rather than "and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (RSV). Perhaps "man" was left as the translation of *anthrōpos* when referring to Adam and to Jesus Christ (5:15, 16, 18, 19) because those two historical figures were men. Unfortunately, that translation decision obscures the important connection Paul is making here between the individual persons (Adam and Jesus Christ) and the collective "person" (all of humanity). Regarding the second concern, it is difficult to imagine that Paul, a product of his age, could have chosen for this argument any representative figures other than two males, Adam and Jesus, or that he could have spoken in general terms, such as "the human." More important, foundational to Paul's understanding of the gospel is the conviction that God acted through a very particular human being, a Jewish male, through whose death and resurrection God

inaugurates a new era. To attempt to obscure any aspect of Christ's identity would be to undermine what theologians refer to as the "scandal of particularity."

A Married Woman (Rom. 7:1–6)

In the context of a discussion about the way in which the gospel carries with it freedom from sin and from the law, Paul uses an analogy about the marriage relationship. In the analogy, he speaks of a married woman being "bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives" and being freed from the law upon her husband's death. If she lives with another man while her husband is still alive, she will be called an adulterer. Following her husband's death, she is able to marry another man without being termed an adulterer (7:2–3). This passage appears to understand a woman solely in terms of her husband, and her freedom simply as a function of his longevity. Nothing is said of the husband's obligation to faithfulness or the husband's being termed an adulterer.

The passage stands in tension with Paul's comments about the marriage relationship in 1 Corinthians 7, where he invokes considerable mutuality in marriage relations (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 7:2–4, 10–16, 34). Unlike 1 Corinthians 7, however, where Paul clearly intends to provide instruction about marriage (within a framework of intense expectation about Jesus' immediate return; see 1 Cor. 7:29–31), in Romans 7 he is not offering a teaching about marriage. He is instead using the law regarding marriage in an analogy. His point appears in 7:4–6, which concludes that believers have died to the law and now belong to Christ. To use this passage to construct an understanding of marriage is to misperceive its function in the letter and to misconstrue Paul's attitude toward women.

Groaning in Labor Pains (Rom. 8:18–25)

This section of the letter portrays the anguish and the confidence with which believers, together with all of creation, await the final triumph of God (8:18–39; see above under "Theological Significance"). Although confident that God will be victorious, believers live in the present age, which is characterized by suffering and decay. As part of his depiction of the expectations of all of creation, Paul writes that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains

until now" (8:22). This vivid use of imagery that derives from the experience of giving birth warrants attention. Here Paul draws on a convention of the Hebrew Bible in which birth pains serve as a metaphor for the period of strife and travail that ushers in a new age (see, e.g., Isa. 13:8; Jer. 4:31). Variations on this metaphor appear in other early Christian writers as well (Mark 13:8; John 16:21; Rev. 12:2).

This is not the only use of such imagery in Paul's letters. Paul speaks of himself as being in labor pains with the Galatians, who must come to birth again as Christians (Gal. 4:19). In 1 Thessalonians 2:7 he compares his relationship to the Thessalonians to that of a nurse charged with caring for her own children. In 1 Corinthians 3:2 Paul laments that he must still give the Corinthians milk to drink (i.e., breast milk), because they are not yet able to take solid food. Even if he is employing conventional expressions, the application of it to himself suggests that one way in which Paul thinks of himself is not only as a father to believers (1 Cor. 4:15) but also as their mother. That maternal role is connected with the gospel itself, which ushers in a new age by means of "groaning in labor pains."

Sarah and Rebecca (Rom. 9:6–13)

In Romans 9–11, Paul addresses the complex and painful question of God's dealings with both Israel and the Gentiles. It may be that some Gentile Christians at Rome have concluded that God has rejected Israel, since most Jews have not recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah (see 11:17–20). By means of a complex argument from Scripture and experience, these chapters insist that God remains faithful to Israel (9:6; 11:1) and that "all Israel" will be saved (11:26). At the outset of this long discussion, Paul offers a brief and peculiar history of Israel. Israel, he writes, is not first of all a "natural" category; it is not composed of all the people who are born to a certain group (ethnicity) but instead it is comprised by God's creation. God calls Israel into being. In the first case, Israel exists because God calls Isaac into being, creates Isaac, promising Abraham and Sarah will have a son (9:9; see also 4:17–19). Paul repeats the point in 9:10–13 with reference to the birth of Jacob and Esau to Rebecca (the only time in Scripture that Rebecca's name appears outside of the Genesis account). These passing references are

frustrating, of course, as we would wish to learn how they were received by women in the Pauline congregations, perhaps especially women who were themselves mothers. But Paul's point here is not to elevate maternity; neither is he elevating human paternity. Instead, he downplays the human role as he insists that it is God who brought these children into existence and thereby created and sustained Israel. This insistence on God's role in creating Israel forms the basis for the conclusions he draws later about the salvation of "all Israel" (11:26).

A Living Sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2)

On the basis of the claims that Paul has made in Romans 1-11 about the grace and the righteousness of God, he turns in 12:1 to an explicit discussion of ethical matters. Romans 12:1-2, then, serve as an introduction to and a basis for the ethical instructions that follow. For women who are accustomed to expectations that they submit to the desires of others and that they deny their own worth, the language of this passage seems fraught with difficulty. Many women have seen themselves as "living sacrifices" and have experienced that as profoundly destructive.

Such an interpretation of this text constitutes a significant misreading of Paul's words. Verse 1 anticipates the response of human beings, male and female, to the "mercies of God." Those mercies demand not a meager offering but a complete response, in which the whole person (the *sōma*, or "body") is handed over to God. Verse 2 explicates this offering. Believers are not to be "conformed to this world," but "transformed by the renewing" of the mind; that is, the thoughts and actions of believers do not simply repeat those of the world at large in this time and place, but they are transformed. By means of the renewal of their minds, itself a gift from God, believers are enabled to discern God's will and live in conformity with it, despite the pressures to conform with "this age." This call for transformation understands that transformation to have its origin and its goal in God. To see this passage as reinforcing the submission of any human being to another human being profoundly distorts its importance.

Be Subject (Rom. 13:1-7)

Ironically, in chapter 13, Paul does in fact instruct his audience to submit: "Let every

person be subject to the governing authorities." Given a history in which some Christian traditions have treated this passage as an absolute endorsement requiring citizens to be obedient to their governments in all circumstances, this text is naturally unsettling. Understanding the historical context gives this passage a different perspective, however. Christians after Paul's time (and especially after Constantine) read it as endorsing the notion that government is divinely established, that is, that government has God on its side. But in Paul's setting, where even the coins identified Caesar as "divine," Paul's comment subtly moves in another direction. He is contending that the governing authorities are ordered by God, that is, God put them in place (and presumably that means God can also remove them).

God Has Welcomed Them (Rom. 14:1-15:13)

As the culmination of the ethical exhortation of this letter, Paul writes an extended discussion on the relationship among groups with varying, even conflicting, religious practices. Paul does not identify these groups, but they may coincide more or less with the ethnic divisions referred to earlier (see above under "Occasion and Purpose"). The "weak" are those who believe that they must abstain from certain foods, including especially those that may be unclean according to Jewish dietary law (see also 1 Cor. 8 and 10). Probably many Jewish Christians belonged to this group, along with those Gentiles who agreed with them. Other Christians, by contrast, believe that they may eat anything, since Christ has abrogated the law. This group would consist primarily of Gentile Christians, although some Jewish Christians may have identified with them. (Those who "eat anything" are often referred to as "the strong," but Paul only introduces that terminology in 15:1.)

These specific disagreements pertain to the circumstances of the first Christian generations, but the way in which Paul adjudicates the issues continues to be instructive. The God-centered (theocentric) character of the letter as a whole obtains here as well. All people belong to God and are accountable only to God for their actions (14:7-12). Though convinced himself that all foods are permitted, Paul insists that believers not behave in ways that will be detrimental to their sisters and brothers. He

also claims that those who act with the conviction that they are wrong, who act with a bad conscience, are in fact wrong before God (14:13-23). Paul concludes this section with an appeal to the behavior of Christ, who pleased others rather than himself and who welcomed all people, both Jew and Gentile (15:1-13). It is only here, in 15:1, that Paul speaks of "we who are strong," and the strength he invokes is that of Jesus, whose strength was bent toward the upbuilding of others.

What Paul advocates here goes well beyond the flaccid tolerance that merely endures differences as a necessary evil while waiting for the final vindication of one's own position. To "welcome one another" (15:7; see also 14:1) is to seek actively to know and to understand another's reasoning and another's judgments, based on the theological assumption that all people belong to God and that God may be served in a variety of ways. This passage, in its historical context, concerns conflicting religious practices that apparently stemmed from varying ethnic groups. Its significance for women and men today may go well beyond that context, to include the bewildering array of conflicts among women and between women and men. Reconciliation begins when all are able to acknowledge with Paul that "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (14:8).

Women in Ministry (Rom. 16:1-16)

In form, this part of the conclusion to Romans is largely conventional. Letters of the period typically include a recommendation of the person who would deliver the letter (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 16:15-17) and a set of greetings (as in 1 Cor. 16:19-20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Phil. 4:21-22). As noted above (see "Contents"), one unusual feature of this set of greetings is that Paul includes an extensive list of individual names and sends that list to people in a city he has not yet visited. Probably he hoped that these individuals would pave the way for the reception of his letter and its content, doing what today would be called "networking."

A second unusual feature of this set of greetings is the prominence of women within it. First comes Phoebe, whom Paul recommends and describes as "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae" and a "benefactor of many and of myself as well." Although Paul writes at a time prior to the establishment of church offices, the fact that Phoebe is a "deacon" (not a "deaconess"

as the RSV erroneously translates) surely means that she serves in some significant leadership role in the congregation at Cenchreae. That she is a "benefactor" (or, better, "a patron") strongly suggests that Phoebe is a person of some wealth and standing and that she has used those assets on behalf of Paul and other Christians.

In addition to being a deacon and a benefactor, Phoebe is almost certainly the person who carries Paul's letter from Corinth to Rome, since he is introducing her to his audience. She may well have been the one who read the letter aloud among the various house churches in Rome, as no other candidate for that task is named, and it would be most beneficial for Paul to have a reader with whom he could have discussed the letter's content in advance. It is not at all far-fetched, then, to identify Phoebe as the first interpreter of Romans, both in her informal comments to gathered believers at Rome and in her actual reading of the letter (reading any text aloud invariably interprets it, depending on the pace, stance, tone of voice, and many other factors).

Among the persons Paul greets in the Roman congregations, nine women appear: Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, the mother of Rufus, Julia, and the sister of Nereus. Paul makes revealing comments about several of them. Prisca is mentioned together with her husband Aquila (see also 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19; Acts 18). Paul speaks of their having "risked their necks" for him and identifies them as the hosts of a congregation. Importantly, Prisca's name is mentioned first here (as also in Acts 18:18, 26); since the more customary practice would have been to mention the husband first (as in Luke 1:5; Acts 5:1), this reversal suggests that she was of higher status (possibly she is a freeborn woman married to a former slave) or perhaps that she was the more prominent Christian leader. Junia is identified with her husband Andronicus as an apostle, and both are said to be "prominent" among the apostles. Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are singled out for their work on behalf of the gospel, and the language Paul uses for them echoes the language he uses elsewhere for apostolic labor (as in 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16). Nothing in Paul's comments justifies the conclusion that these women worked in ways that differed either in kind or in quality from the ways in which men worked. Indeed, all of the individuals listed appear to be engaged in

tasks of ministry, a fact that needs to be taken into account in any assessment of the roles of women in early Christianity. Whatever Paul writes or does not write elsewhere, here he simply assumes that women too are God's agents on behalf of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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1 CORINTHIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Paul founded the church in Corinth around 51 CE. First Corinthians—actually the second letter Paul wrote to this church (see 1 Cor. 5:9)—provides an account of this early work (1 Cor. 1–3), but it is highly rhetorical and yields few concrete details beyond the names of the first converts (1:14–16). The dramatic account in Acts 18:1–18 is more detailed, but the historical reliability of that book is uncertain. Nevertheless, there one learns of various individuals who participated in the founding of the church, including Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila, a missionary couple with whom Paul stayed in Corinth (see also 1 Cor. 16:19). Though Acts suggests an ethnically diverse church of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul addresses the entire congregation as formerly pagans, that is, as Gentiles (1 Cor. 12:2). The social makeup of the church, however, was clearly diverse (1 Cor. 1:26–29), and this was a factor in the disputes there.

Between Paul's departure from the church and the writing of 1 Corinthians, there were a number of important developments and a lively exchange of information. Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to remind them of his teachings (4:17); he wrote the Corinthians a letter with instructions, which they misunderstood (5:9–13); Chloe's people (the slaves, relatives, or associates of an otherwise unknown, but apparently influential, woman) brought Paul news of divisions within the church (1:11); and a delegation

of three men arrived from Corinth and were with Paul when he wrote this letter (16:17–18). These men were probably the bearers of a letter from the church (7:1) in which the Corinthians raised questions concerning, or challenging, Paul's earlier instructions. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (16:8), probably in 54 CE, in order to respond to these developments.

The outline of the letter is fairly straightforward. In the opening chapters Paul lays the rhetorical and theological groundwork for his later admonitions. In chapters 5–6 he addresses issues communicated by Chloe's delegation, while chapters 7–16 are primarily devoted to questions raised in the Corinthians' letter. Points where Paul explicitly responds to these questions are signaled by the phrase, "Now concerning . . ." (see 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

As Paul responds to the Corinthians' written questions, he frequently quotes from or alludes to their letter to him. This, of course, posed no problem for the Corinthians, who would have immediately recognized Paul's references to their own words. For the contemporary reader, however, it generates serious problems. Where is Paul quoting the Corinthians' opinions, and where is he citing his own? Where does his wording of an argument derive from their phrasing of the question, and where does it reflect and accurately convey his own particular emphases? These issues must be constantly kept in mind.