

THE INTRINSIC NATURE OF THE GOSPEL¹

by
Daniel K. Davey²

Time has opened the womb of the 21st century only to find the modern world in many severe crises. There is a crisis of security so that many folks not only feel unsafe traveling outside the borders of America, but also feel a sense of reservation when moving about within the homeland. There is also a crisis of morality so that average American citizens, their politicians, and even their clergy seem confused and unable to answer rudimentary moral questions, such as, What constitutes a family? or Who can live together with civil blessing and enjoy financial benefits? or When does life begin? or Should there be terminus laws when a human life is deemed to be either a societal weight or without possibility of being socially productive? Yet the most severe crisis—maybe even at the root of all other modern crises—is the crisis of theological pluralism. To put it in the words of Okholm and Phillips, “Pluralism, or more accurately, normative religious pluralism, maintains that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to the divine Reality.”³ In effect, one who embraces “religious pluralism” refuses to accept any absolute statement of any religion that its way is the only way to salvation, Heaven, and God. He sees no

¹This journal is dedicated to a man whose life and ministry have placed a positive, indelible mark on my own ministry of the Word. In 1978, I graduated from college and immediately entered seminary. In my first semester of class, I was required to take my first three-hour systematic theology course. Both the class and the professor were used of God to change the direction of my life. This is not just a platitude or words of flattery, for a genuine metamorphosis began in my soul that is continuing until this day. My systematic class was Theology 411, and my professor was Dr. Roland McCune. From my class, I learned invaluable truths, and the indispensability of accuracy in handling the Word of God; however, from my professor I learned to love the God of this incredible truth. Thank you, Dr. McCune, for your life-investment in many students like me—what longsuffering you have practiced!

²Dr. Davey is President and Professor of Practical Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Virginia Beach, VA.

³Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 17.

“evidence that any one religion is soteriologically unique or superior to others.”⁴ In other words, the pluralistic approach to theology rebuffs any attempt to give soteriological exclusivity to any single “savior/messiah” or group that is devoted to following the teachings of that savior.

It seems to me that those who adopt this theological opinion stand opposite of the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the clear writings of the apostle Paul, who defines and defends “the gospel of God” in his salvation masterpiece, the book of Romans.

A WORD ABOUT THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Paul’s letter to the Romans was “a word in season”⁵ when it appeared in the first century. Godet writes, “Every time that, in the course of the ages, it [Romans] has recovered the place of honor that belongs to it, it has inaugurated a new era.”⁶ The reason for its extraordinary influence and dominance within church history (and even secular history)⁷ may be demonstrated by the five-hundred-year-old words of Martin Luther who wrote that Romans is “the chief part of the New Testament and very purest Gospel.”⁸

The point of Paul’s historic letter is seen in his opening words in which he identifies himself as a God-called apostle and then declares his divine assignment for life and ministry as one who is “separated to

⁴Ibid.

⁵Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), p. xi.

⁶Ibid.

⁷C. H. Dodd writes, “From the time of Augustine it [Romans] had immense influence on the thought of the West, not only in theology, but also in philosophy and even in politics.... For us men of Western Christendom there is probably no other single writing so deeply embedded in our heritage of thought” (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary [New York: Harper & Row, 1932], p. xii). Also, as C. K. Barrett notes, “That its [Romans] influence upon life and thought in the Christian Church has been radical and far reaching needs no demonstration” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper Commentary Series [New York: Harper & Bradstreet, 1957], p. 1). In addition, C. E. B. Cranfield writes “that the Epistle of Romans has drawn to itself so many commentaries, is certainly not surprising in view of the important part which this document has played in the history of the Church and of Christian life and thought” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], 1:30–31). For a fuller development on the value of Romans in both ancient and current times see the author’s work, “A Fresh Look at the Romans Letter: Understanding the Unity Purpose of Paul for Romans” (Th.D. dissertation, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993).

⁸Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), p. xiii.

[marked by]⁹ the gospel of God” (1:1).¹⁰ This gospel is Paul’s singular life-focus, and he wastes no time or space in his Romans letter before he gives the church a clear definition of that gospel (1:2–4) and reminds them of its power and influence in their lives (1:5–8).¹¹

Therefore, it would seem both intellectually honest and exegetically legitimate to fully understand the apostle’s description of the gospel and then compare or contrast our modern day perceptions and insights with those explicit statements of Paul. This should be of special interest since Paul claimed what he received was, in his words, “given to me for you...by [divine] revelation” (Eph 3:2–3). Assuming the accuracy of Paul’s assertion, a review of his salvation exposition may unveil the current religious pluralistic crisis as nothing more than a conscious departure from the clearly revealed statements of Holy Scripture,¹² which may be more accurately termed intellectual bigotry or sheer rejection of divine truth.¹³

PAUL’S DEFINITION OF THE GOSPEL

The first ninety-three Greek words of the Romans letter (1:1–7) encompass four measured thoughts: Paul’s self-identity (v. 1), his definition of the gospel message (vv. 2–4), his task in life and ministry (v. 5), and his audience (vv. 6–7). Each of these four thoughts have a direct bearing on the gospel as Paul understood it.

His Self-Identity (v. 1)

According to Paul’s own testimony (1:11–13), he had never been to Rome, so he begins his written remarks by identifying who he is and what God had called him to accomplish. In the opening words of the letter, he introduces himself with a threefold description: “a bondservant of Jesus Christ,”¹⁴ “called...an apostle,”¹⁵ and “one separated to

⁹Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 347. Also see Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀπορίζω,” p. 158 [hereafter cited as BDAG].

¹⁰All Scripture quotations are from the *New King James Version*.

¹¹Cranfield notes, “In introducing himself he naturally refers to his mission, and this leads to a highly significant definition of the gospel which it is his mission to proclaim” (*Romans*, 1:47).

¹²γραφῆς ἁγίας (Rom 1:2).

¹³This is how I understand John Hick’s view in his chapter entitled “A Pluralistic View” in *More Than One Way?* pp. 29–59.

¹⁴Rengstorff notes that Paul uses “the bondservant of Jesus Christ” in parallel with

the gospel of God.”¹⁶ With these three phrases, “Paul introduces himself to the Roman church with three parallel designations that, respectively, identify his master [“Jesus Christ”], his office [“an apostle”], and his purpose [“separated to the Gospel”].”¹⁷

The importance of this opening verse cannot be underestimated, for all that will follow in the Romans letter will have the unmistakable stamp of apostolic authority and divine purpose. This, in effect, reveals his permission to write such a letter as Romans. Also, any theological dogma that veers from what Paul will now state about the gospel must be viewed as less than authoritative, or, more directly, a false gospel.

His Gospel Message Defined (vv. 2–4)

Paul was well aware of the fact that there were false salvation messages milling around the towns and villages where he had preached and taught. In fact, early in his public ministry, in his first of what would later become a core of thirteen letters, he writes,

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Gal 1:6–9).

Therefore, in clear terms, Paul defines and protects the message he had been given by God, and this message has several indispensable components. Paul takes no credit for the content of the gospel. He

“apostle of Jesus Christ.” He writes, “If the latter describes Paul’s office according to its significance and operation towards those without, the former describes it according to the relationship to Christ and therefore, its final basis, which consists in the fact that Christ had won Paul from the world and made him His possession” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “δούλος,” by Karl H. Rengstorff, 2:277).

¹⁵Cranfield writes, “The word κλητός [“called”] here expresses the thought of divine calling in opposition to human self-appointment—it is not on the basis of presumptuous human ambition but on the basis of God’s call that Paul is an apostle” (*Romans*, 1:51). Again, p. 52, “The word points away from the apostle’s person to him whose apostle he is. It is thus both a very humble word and also at the same time expressive of the most august authority.”

¹⁶Douglas Moo states, “In saying that he has been ‘set apart for the gospel of God,’ then, Paul is claiming that his life is totally dedicated to God’s act of salvation in Christ.... With this meaning, ‘of God’ probably can be paraphrased ‘sent by God’” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], p. 43).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 40.

proclaims that this gospel is “of God,” meaning, sourced in God alone. Moo concludes, “This genitive addition [“of God”] should not be overlooked,”¹⁸ for it properly reminds us that “Romans is ultimately a book about *God*: how *he* acted to bring salvation, how *his* justice is preserved, how *his* purposes are worked out in history, how *he* can be served by his people.”¹⁹

So that no one may misunderstand, Paul identifies the content of God’s gospel (1:2–3) as something “He promised,” through “His prophets,” concerning “His Son Jesus Christ.” Additionally, Paul states that this gospel content was not just spoken “to” and “by” God’s prophets but was written down in the “holy writings,” meaning, the OT Scriptures.²⁰ In other words, the gospel of God has verifiable, historical markers, which are open to all to read and study. In just a few words Paul laid out a powerful argument for “the gospel of God” as something that did not originate with him, but was, in fact, something which predated him by centuries in a collection of divine revelatory promises and was preserved in documents written by holy, trusted, and ancient prophets.

The content of the gospel is exclusively concerned with Jesus Christ and has two distinct components. First, Christ—“His Son” and “our Lord” (v. 3)—became flesh. He is designated as “Son [of God]” in the OT (which means He had this designation/title *before* His incarnation²¹), and He was born (in time) of the “seed of David,” meaning that He properly fulfills all the OT prophecies concerning the promised Davidic Messiah. Since He is of David’s seed, then He is of the Jewish race, again, fulfilling important Messianic prophecies. However, the entire picture is not complete without the next verse, which reveals the second feature of this gospel. While Christ becoming flesh was necessary, being marked out²² as the Son of God with power

¹⁸Moo, *Romans*, p. 43.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 7. “This pre-announcement of the gospel is made in the Messianic promises, prophecies, and types of the New Testament. Paul finds all of the cardinal doctrines of the New Testament, germinally, in the Old, and cites the Old Testament in proof of the truths and facts of Christianity.... [“Scriptures”] is anarthrous, because a well-known collection is meant. It is equivalent to a proper noun” (*ibid.*).

²¹Moo does an excellent exegetical job defending the eternal sonship of Christ and defeating the improper notion of incarnational sonship (*Romans*, pp. 46–51).

²²The Greek root is *ορίζω* and is the same root for “separated” in verse 1. It has the idea of being marked out, appointed, or fixed. Moo explains this verb and lists the other seven occurrences in the NT as found in Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 11:29; 17:26, 31; and Heb 4:7 (*Romans*, p. 47).

through His bodily resurrection completes the OT Messianic image. Moo correctly concludes,

What Paul is claiming, then, is that the preexistent Son, who entered into human experience as the promised Messiah, was appointed on the basis of...the resurrection to a new and more powerful position in relation to the world. By virtue of his obedience to the will of the Father (cf. Phil. 2:6–11) and because of the eschatological revelation of God's saving power in the gospel (1:1, 16), the Son attains a new, exalted status as "Lord" (cf. v. 4b). Son of God from eternity, he becomes Son of God "in power."²³

In essence, verses 3–4 are Paul's descriptive statement that what had been prophesied and written in the OT concerning the Son of God came true in Jesus Christ. If one traces the Messiah passages through the OT, he will find that these prophetic utterances exactly and completely match the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Clearly, when Christ rose from the dead, Paul did not consider Him to be transitioning "from a human messiah to a divine Son of God."²⁴ Rather, as the preexistent Son of God, he is now exalted to a new, prophesied status by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new, resurrected status is actually a dual role, which Christ fulfills and serves to this present day as both saving Messiah²⁵ ("Jesus Christ") and sovereign Master²⁶ ("Lord").

His Task and Ministry (v. 5)

Paul declares that through Jesus Christ he received the gift of apostleship.²⁷ This gracious gift is explained by three modifiers or prepositional phrases which, as Moo describes, draw attention to his life-task as a "called" apostle.²⁸ First, Paul's task is identified by the purpose he has been assigned by God to accomplish. This ultimate goal is to see the world become obedient to faith. The words "obedient" and "faith"

²³Moo, *Romans*, p. 49.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Isa 53:7–8 with Acts 8:32–35.

²⁶Matt 28:18; Ps 110:1 with Matt 22:41–46 and Acts 2:32–36.

²⁷Thomas Schreiner writes, "The words 'grace'...and 'apostleship'...should be combined to refer to 'the gracious apostolate'...that Paul received.... The statement that this apostolic ministry was received through Jesus Christ also testifies to its gracious character" (*Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], p. 33). Also, Cranfield sees these two words as an example of hendiadys "denoting the grace, or undeserved favour, of apostleship, the office of apostle as a gracious gift undeserved by any human worth" (*Romans*, 1:65).

²⁸Moo fully develops these three modifiers (*Romans*, p. 51).

are integral to the gospel message as Paul defines it in his Romans letter and should be viewed as inseparable concepts linking what one knows with what one does.²⁹ Paul's objective in life is to see people come to faith in Christ and then be mastered by His righteousness (cf. 6:1–13).

The second modifier of Paul's ministry-task identifies the scope of his mission. Paul writes that his gift of apostleship is for "all the Gentiles." Schreiner properly notes that this phrase "signaled the universal dimensions of his ministry."³⁰ We can conclude, he writes, "No people group or ethnic entity was to be excluded. One of the major themes of Romans is here anticipated inasmuch as the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God on the same terms as the Jews is often proclaimed in this letter (e.g., 3:2, 31; 4:11–12, 16–17; 10:11–13; 16:26)."³¹

This worldwide assignment of Paul became more than just a personal directive from God, it became, rather a deep, heart-felt passion. To the Roman church he declares that "he longs to see" them so that he might strengthen and encourage them (1:11–12). In fact, he "had often planned to come" to them, but "was hindered until now" (1:11, 13). He desired "to have some fruit among" them and considered himself to be "a debtor" to all those in Rome who were "Greeks...barbarians...wise and...unwise" (1:14). Yet his burden was also just as real toward his own ethnic people, for he writes, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved" (10:1). For Paul, his own people were a "continual grief" of heart (9:2) because of their rejection of the gospel of God (cf. 11:11–25). Therefore, as one studies this God-given mission of Paul and his burden to reach both Jew and Gentile with the gospel, Paul becomes a pristine example of one who not only ministered because of a divine call, and with intellectual skill, but with a broken heart for the lost souls of both Gentile and Jewish people.

The third modifier of Paul's ministry identifies "the undergirding motivation sustaining his ministry" while he served his world with a broken heart.³² Paul's desire to see both the Gentiles and his own

²⁹Moo notes, "We understand the words 'obedience' and 'faith' to be mutually interpreting: obedience always involves faith, and faith always involves obedience. They should not be equated, compartmentalized, or made into separate stages of Christian experience. Paul called men and women to a faith that was always inseparable from obedience...and to an obedience that could never be divorced from faith—for we can obey Jesus as Lord only when we have given ourselves to him in faith" (ibid., pp. 52–53).

³⁰Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 34.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 35.

countrymen saved found its ultimate source in the character and name of Jesus Christ, or as the text literally reads, “in behalf (ὕπέρ) of his name.” Paul’s fundamental motivation for ministry was not soteriological (the salvation of those to whom he was called), but doxological (the glory of God and His purpose for calling him into ministry in the first place).³³ Cranfield concludes that Paul’s ministry motivation is “a reminder [to us] that the true end of the preaching of the gospel and of the winning of men to faith is not just the good of those to whom the preaching is directed, but also—and above all—the glorification of Christ, of God.”³⁴

When all three modifiers of Paul’s ministry are fully understood, then the gospel of God is seen as more than just an academic explanation of divine truth. Interestingly, Paul was so marked by the gospel (1:1) and consumed with the gospel (10:1) that he closes his letter by referring to “the gospel of God” as “my gospel” (16:25; cf. 2:16). It is little wonder then, that Paul can begin his Romans letter by identifying his life and ministry as one who is “separated unto the gospel of God.” Paul greatly valued his call and fully understood the weight of the gospel content. The truth is, when the gospel is valued today in the same way it was valued by Paul, then we may expect both to be marked by this gospel in Pauline fashion and, perhaps, to experience (in some measure) the Pauline effects of the gospel ministry.

His Audience (vv. 6–7)

Now that Paul had defined the gospel of God and declared his allegiance to its message, he graciously identifies his readers in Rome, who through the message of the gospel had experienced the effect of its power. Paul uses three phrases to distinguish these Roman believers: “called of Jesus Christ;” “beloved of God;” and “called saints.” Twice Paul uses the term “called” as he did to designate his own ministry-office in verse 1. For Paul, this term always emphasizes “divine action.”³⁵ This sovereign activity of God in selecting these believers through belief in the gospel’s message (cf. 1:16) is clear evidence of His eternal love for them (cf. 5:8). As the “beloved of God” they now enjoy a new status as “saints,” for their acceptance of the gospel has com-

³³Schreiner writes, “The ultimate reason for a mission to the Gentiles was not the salvation of the Gentiles but the proclamation of the name of Jesus Christ. What was fundamental for Paul was the glory and praise of Jesus Christ. This aim was accomplished through the preaching of his gospel to both Jews and Gentiles” (ibid., pp. 35–36).

³⁴Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:67.

³⁵Ibid., 1:69.

pletely set them apart to God.³⁶ The Roman believers, then, are a living example of the powerful effect of the gospel message for all who will believe (1:16).

In less than one hundred words, Paul identifies himself with the believers in Rome through the gospel message he preaches and in which they believed. This leads him to raise his voice in thanksgiving to God for these believers and declare his desire to one day see these saints face to face (1:8–15). In fact, as far as he was concerned, he was immediately ready to see them and to “preach the gospel” in their city (1:14). Though Paul was ready to travel to Rome, he seemed uncertain of when he would be able to do so (1:10). Therefore, he was compelled to further develop in his letter several major themes of the gospel of God which would establish this group of believers in the faith in his uncertain delay (15:14–16). Three of these gospel themes are directly encountered by the reader in rapid fire within the next few verses of the letter.

THREE THEMES OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

The second half of chapter 1 (vv. 16–32) develops three interdependent themes that precisely relate to the content of the gospel, and these subjects which are introduced by Paul will be further nuanced in the later chapters of his letter. Each of these introductory topics discusses a certain feature of the gospel message which clearly defines salvation in divine terms. In other words, apart from God there is no gospel, and within the gospel there is the splendid unfolding of the exclusive, eternal work of God. These salvation topics which display his divine character, such as his omnipotent power, love, and holiness, are as follows: the rescue of the believer by “the power of God” (1:16); the eternal provision the believer receives at salvation in “the righteousness of God” (1:17); and for those who dismiss the gospel the dismal gloom of “the wrath of God” (1:18–32).

The Power of God

The gospel message is completely void of man’s ability and power. As Luther put it, “The Gospel is called the power of God in contradistinction to the power of man.”³⁷ This power of God is not just a terse announcement about the fact of God’s divine ability but the only ac-

³⁶Moo writes, “Paul uses ‘saints’ at least 38 times to designate Christians (four other times in salutations), the focus being not on behavior but on status: Christians are those who *have been* sanctified ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (1 Cor. 6:11)” (*Romans*, p. 55).

³⁷Luther emphatically concludes, “Man’s own power must be destroyed” (*Romans*, p. 24).

tive ingredient which can rescue and liberate a man from eternal death (cf. 6:23).³⁸ This power of God is able to accomplish what the entire OT law could never do: rescue a man or woman from hell.³⁹ As Paul later declared in his letter,

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (8:3–4a).

According to 1:16, one's personal faith in the gospel's content, or belief in all that Jesus Christ came to do in behalf of the sinner, is what activates this power of God to operate and rescue a human life (cf. 3:21–26). Later in his letter, Paul is careful not to make faith either a prerequisite of or contribution to God's saving power to work in his life. If faith, on the one hand, is a prerequisite found within man before God can work in his behalf, then faith is indeed a required work and functions independent of God's grace and mercy. However, on the other hand, if man must make a contribution to faith, fulfilling some precondition, then faith is really a meritorious human activity or work.⁴⁰ In either case, faith is heretically defined and opposite Pauline theology (cf. 4:1–8). "For Paul," Cranfield aptly writes, "man's salvation is altogether—not almost altogether—God's work."⁴¹ However, Paul's view of faith or "believing" in 1:16 is man responding to the gospel message with *understanding* (cf. Matt 13:19), *approval* (agreement with all God says about the gospel), and *decision* (personal commitment to trust Christ alone for his salvation).⁴² Paul argues later in his letter that "the word of faith which we preach" (10:8) generates this

³⁸Barrett writes, "Thus the Gospel itself is the operation of God's power working toward salvation; not merely an announcement of the fact that salvation will at some future time take place, but a divine activity or power leading to salvation. Like the word of God in the prophets, the Gospel itself is a power which leads either to life or death (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23f; 2 Cor. 2:15f)" (*Romans*, p. 28).

³⁹As I have noted elsewhere, "This concept of God's power (δύναμις θεοῦ) had its theological roots in the Old Testament. The same power which delivered and protected the nation of Israel in past centuries was now bringing deliverance (σωτηρίαν) from sin and protection from wrath to all who believe. Paul was writing polemically to counter the Jewish notion that salvific power was endemic and ultimately related to their law" (Davey, "Romans," p. 77).

⁴⁰Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:90.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Wayne Grudem develops these three words (understanding, approval, trust/decision) with theological and exegetical precision (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 712).

genuine faith within an unsaved man (10:17) so that he might understand, approve, and decide for the truth of God about his Savior, Jesus Christ (3:22). When man exercises his belief in the gospel and is saved, he has, in effect, taken God fully and exactly at His word. Therefore, “believing” is truly a genuine human action, but “possesses no ‘merit’ or worth for which God is somehow bound to reward us; for salvation is, from first to last, *God’s* work.”⁴³ This is not duplicitous terminology; rather, Pauline faith is absent of human merit or reward, and occurs when the gospel is personally understood, approved, and trusted. Such faith, when exercised, has been generated by the Word of God causing the sinner to favorably respond to the gospel, simultaneously unleashing the power of God to regenerate, which results in that man being given spiritual life, being rescued from the wrath of God, and being declared righteous before the presence of God.⁴⁴

The Righteousness of God⁴⁵

The essential core of the gospel message is initially announced by Paul with his declaration that “in it [that is, the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed.”⁴⁶ This righteousness is comprehensive in its definition and includes three related parts. First, it declares God to be just and true in His being, always faithful to his character and word (God’s attribute).⁴⁷ Second, this phrase refers to the saving activity of God (God’s actions).⁴⁸ This concept, Moo points out, is often related to the OT understanding of God’s saving intervention in behalf of the Israelites and is found at least fourteen times in the ancient Scriptures.⁴⁹ Finally, this phrase refers to the righteous status God provides for all those who put their faith in him for salvation.⁵⁰ This, in fact, is

⁴³Moo, *Romans*, p. 68.

⁴⁴BDAG, s.v. “σώζω,” pp. 982–83, defines this term as “save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue, thrive, prosper.” In addition, p. 249 gives a definition of δικαιώω as to pronounce one righteous and to treat one as such.

⁴⁵Moo notes that this phrase “the righteousness of God” is found only eight times in the book of Romans (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 25; 10:3 twice; *Romans*, p. 70). In addition, this phrase is found in the NT only one other time and that is in 2 Cor 5:21.

⁴⁶Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:9, correctly explains that the pronoun “it” in verse 17 refers back to “the gospel” in verse 16a which had been the “unexpressed subject” of verse 16b.

⁴⁷Shedd, *Romans*, pp. 16–17, and Moo, *Romans*, p. 70, develop this genitive usage.

⁴⁸Moo, *Romans*, pp. 71, 82–83.

⁴⁹Moo, *Romans*, p. 82, gives all fourteen occurrences as Exod 15:13; Pss 35:24; 36:6, 10; 71:2; 89:16; 103:17; 111:3; 119:40; 143:1, 11; 145:7; Isa 38:19; and 63:7.

⁵⁰Cranfield states, “δικαιοσύνη refers to man’s righteous status which is the result

the grand conclusion of the righteousness of God for mankind in the book of Romans. Paul affirms that God is righteous and trustworthy in his being, and that it is within his nature to intervene in man's humanly inescapable plight of sin and its consequences, which he has done as announced in the gospel of God. This gospel announces God's salvation gift as a new, justified status before God, granting the sinner forgiveness of sin and imputing God's own righteousness to the sinner's account. It is no wonder that Paul glories in this "righteous status" and quotes a hymn of David (Ps 32:1–2) to describe "the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness," singing "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven.... Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin" (4:6–8).

Paul carefully expresses in verse 17 that this righteousness is a result of faith alone (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν), which he again emphasizes in the rest of his letter (e.g., 3:21–22).⁵¹ Cranfield paraphrases the full nuance of Paul's intention with these words, "For in it (i.e., in the gospel as it is being preached) a righteous status which is God's gift is being revealed (and so offered to men)—a righteous status which is altogether by faith."⁵² Paul then closes his thought with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 which emphasizes the necessity of faith in the life of a believer even when life's circumstances seem to deny the veracity of the Word of God. Just as the prophet Habakkuk was told by God that evil things would happen to the children of Israel, so he was also told that the faith of the genuine believer would distinguish him from the pagan world, and even among those of Jewish ethnicity. Paul's quotation of this OT verse underscores faith as God's principal ingredient for both saving blessing and for future life. "For," writes Paul, "the just *will live* by faith" (1:17b).

The Wrath of God⁵³

The final theme of Romans 1 relates to all those who reject the gracious provision of salvation in the gospel. Paul clearly states that gospel-rejectors will face "the wrath of God." In verse 18, Paul chooses to use the word "men" (ἀνθρώπων) rather than "Gentiles" (ἐθνῶν) for

of God's action of justifying" (*Romans*, 1:97).

⁵¹Moo says that there is only one other clear parallel construction to this phrase and that is in 2 Cor 2:16. He concludes, "In light of the only clear NT parallel to the construction, the combination is rhetorical and is intended to emphasize that faith and 'nothing but faith' can put us into right relationship with God" (*Romans*, p. 76).

⁵²Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:100.

⁵³Cranfield writes, "The word ὀργή occurs elsewhere in Romans eleven times (2.5 twice, 8; 3.5; 4.15; 5.9; 9.22 twice; 12.19; 13.4, 5), the reference always being to the divine wrath" (*Romans*, 1:110, n. 2).

the clear purpose that all people—Jew and Greek, and male and female—who commit “unrighteous” and/or “ungodly” acts will face the wrath of God. Though Paul’s ultimate conclusion of “all under sin” is not found until later in his letter (3:9), he is obviously beginning his discussion of it in 1:18 by implicating the whole world as being full of rebellion and sin (cf. 3:23).

A proper Pauline understanding of God’s wrath in the book of Romans must include several different aspects of this phrase to accurately reflect this profound expression. The first relates to the future, an eschatological wrath which is to plunge the entire world of gospel rejecters into eternal separation and the fire of hell. This future judgment from God is announced by Paul in such passages as 2:5 where Paul says that those with an unrepentant heart are “treasuring up for themselves wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” In 5:9 Paul writes, “Having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” Again, in 6:23 Paul writes, “the wages of sin is death.” Paul acknowledges that all men have a day of reckoning with God. He is careful to maintain that it will be a “righteous judgment” upon the sinner, but it will also be a judgment of God’s wrath with the sure penalty of eternal separation (“death”), indignation, wrath, tribulation, and anguish (6:23; 2:7–8).

The second aspect of God’s wrath which Paul relates to his readers involves a present sense in which the wrath of God is occurring right now in the world. This current wrath may take several forms such as in 2:15 where those without a righteous standing before God have a conscience which torments them, or in Paul’s words, “their thoughts accusing” them. Certainly, this earthly form of God’s judgment upon the unregenerate mind will have a variety of pangs and pricks, and it will truly be bothersome to the wicked. Another form may be found in 1:27, where God gives men and women over to their vile, homosexual lusts, for which, as Paul notes, they will receive “in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.” It is difficult for commentators to say exactly what Paul meant. Does he merely mean that sexual perversion will cause men to go astray from the truth? Does he mean that perverse people will so stray from God that they will have “appropriate but unspecified punishment for their sexual perversion?”⁵⁴ Or, does he mean that sexual deviants will face a diseased body that will seriously punish them for their perversion? The answers are not fully satisfying; however, what is clear is that they do receive some kind of punishment for their perverted lifestyle while they are in the body.

Along with a tormented conscience and physical retribution for sin, another present form of God’s wrath is found in 13:1–6. In this

⁵⁴Ibid., 1:127.

passage, Paul says that God may use government authorities to exercise “wrath on him who practices evil” (13:4).⁵⁵ Though laws and punishments may vary with both culture and time, disobedience to the civil ordinances will bring the wrath of “judgment on themselves” (13:2). This governmental wrath is divinely approved in this passage because governmental authority is “appointed by God” (13:1) and is considered to be “God’s minister” that is “an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (13:4, 6). In this way, the wrath of God is performed on earth against those who disdain “good works” (13:3).

The third aspect of God’s wrath is the clearest and most fully developed of the three ideas concerning divine wrath. It explains why God’s wrath was poured out upon his Son at the cross. Cranfield insightfully writes, “It is not that we do not see the full meaning of the wrath of God in the disasters befalling sinful men in the course of history: the reality of the wrath of God is only truly known when it is seen in its revelation in Gethsemane and on Golgotha.”⁵⁶ Paul uses the early verses of his letter to explain why the wrath of God is upon mankind and develops three clear indictments: all men *suppress* the truth of the gospel (1:18),⁵⁷ all men *ignore* the truth of the Godhead (1:19–21), and all men *exchange* the truth of God’s glory for self-created lies (1:22–23). He concludes in chapter 3 that “all are under sin” (3:9). The “whole force of [this]...portion of the Epistle has been to demonstrate that all men...lie under the condemnation and the wrath of God.”⁵⁸ Paul then unfolds God’s salvation plan in 3:21–26 with the clearest of terms. Morris writes that up to this point in Paul’s letter “wrath has occupied such an important place in the argument...that we are justified in looking for some expression indicative of its cancellation in the process which brings about salvation.”⁵⁹ We find this “cancellation” in the conclusion of the “wrath section” of Paul’s letter in the phrase “propitiation by His blood” (ἰλαστήριον διὰ τῆς

⁵⁵Schreiner gives the explanation on the state “not bearing the sword in vain” as a broad “judicial function of the state, particularly its right to deprive of life those who have committed crimes worthy of death” (*Romans*, p. 684). He concludes, “The government’s function is to inflict wrath, to vindicate justice...in the case of one who flouts the law and does what is evil” (pp. 684–85).

⁵⁶Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:110.

⁵⁷The truth which men suppress must relate to the context of Romans 1 which is the truth of the gospel message. In other words, men “hold down” (κατέχω, cf. same term in 7:6) the content of the gospel refusing to accept it as God’s plan of salvation for all mankind.

⁵⁸Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 200.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 201.

πίστεως). Two theological thoughts run parallel in the meaning of this phrase. First, in Christ's crosswork, the wrath of God finds its only eternal and full satisfaction.⁶⁰ No other means can be found to satisfy the righteous demand of God for sin. While expiation of sin is meant by this phrase, it is not the only thing that it means. The parallel thought is that Christ's death on the cross is the substitute—the only substitute—for man that will fully satisfy this righteous demand of God.⁶¹ Therefore, in one simple phrase Paul shows that man has a real substitute for sin's present and ultimate consequences, and that Jesus Christ's death has fully appeased the blistering wrath of God. It is no wonder, then, that the concept of God's wrath can only be fully understood in light of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

When these three themes of "God's power," "God's righteousness," and "God's wrath," are seen in the light of the Romans context, then we can digest Morris' words when he writes, "Salvation for Paul is essentially a salvation *from* as well as a salvation *unto*."⁶² Certainly, believing the gospel saves a man *from* the wrath of God, but it also saves a man *unto* the power of God and the righteousness of God. It is a gospel which is fully resting in the work of God through his Son, Jesus Christ; however, it is only accessed by faith in the revealed Word of God (cf. 5:2). Mysterious as this seems, it is the ultimate demonstration of the incredible and wonderful mind and wisdom of God. It is of little wonder that Paul concludes the doctrinal section of the Romans letter with a hymn, which magnifies these blessed truths. He writes,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (11:33–36)

CONCLUSION

Romans chapter 1 is not just the "first words" of Paul to a church of the first century, but the commencement of a weighty exposition of the gospel of God for all men in every subsequent age. Paul's life and ministry was dominated by this theme, and the rest of the Romans letter will support and develop the intrinsic nature of this gospel. The Apostle was careful to explain that the original prophetic articulation of this message belonged to the prophets of the OT. But he was

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 199–200.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 201.

⁶²Ibid., p. 199 (emphasis of *from* is his, and of *unto* is mine).

equally clear that what was prophesied was incomplete until God's Son, Jesus Christ, came into the world to fulfill all that these prophets anticipated. For mankind in the 21st century to either neglect or attempt to diffuse Paul's didactic letter is to turn one's back on both the Old and New Testaments. In such a case, man is living without divine truth and is dying without an eternal hope. However, for those who fully embrace the Romans letter, a present blessing and a future joy await them; or, in Paul's words, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (8:18–19).