

Session 2 Outline – Mike Bird

What is Romans About?

Paul's epistle to the Romans is arguably the densest and most debated book of the New Testament. It is a delight to read, but it is hard work to teach through and preach from. Almost every paragraph contains caverns of controversy, but also theological gems for those who dare to dig deep enough into those caverns to find them. There are so many famous and favorite verses that we can recall like "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8) or "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). Studying Romans is daunting, yet rewarding!

But what is Romans really about? What is the big idea behind the letter? And what should be the main thing we take away from it?

A common view in evangelical circles is that Romans is about the road to salvation, sinners discovering the love and mercy of God, so much so that you can sweep up several verses from the letter to create a charming little evangelical tract about how to get saved. The Roman road to salvation usually goes something like this:

1. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ([Rom 3:23](#)).
2. The punishment for sin is eternal death (Rom 6:23).
3. The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus (Rom 6:23 again).
4. People are saved by confessing with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord (Rom 10:9).
5. Those who are justified through faith have peace with God (Rom 5:1).

I'm partly sympathetic to this perspective. After all, Paul in this letter to the Romans does say a lot about the gospel, about God, about atonement, about faith, about salvation and eternal life. But the fallacy of composition tells us to beware of the view that what is true of the part is really true of the whole. Yes, parts of Romans do tell us how to get saved, but that does not mean that this is the main point of the whole letter. When it comes to the Roman road of salvation, Christian blogger and scholar Andrew Perriman points out its deficiencies: "What's wrong with that? Well, to start with, you

can hardly call it a road. Someone has dug up half-a-dozen paving stones from Paul's argument and laid them in a line. That's not a road. It's not even much of a path."¹

I want to suggest to you that Romans has a different purpose and a different application, beyond an artificially constructed neo-Puritan and hyper-individualist account of salvation, something far more profound for my mind. I submit to you that Romans is really about creating a messianic missional community where, despite painful differences and manifold diversities, there is a reciprocal acceptance of one another and a shared commitment to unity. Paul's letter to the Romans is really a missional letter that calls on the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman churches to be united in the gospel, to receive one another in faith, and to come together to support the spread of the apostolic preaching of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

This theme of unity, specifically, the interlocking destinies of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, is rehearsed across the letter. When Paul says that the gospel is for the "Jew first and also to the Greek," he implies that the gospel is not for the Greek instead of the Jew (Rom 1:16). The whole premise behind Rom 1:18–3:20 is that Jews and Gentiles both stand condemned before God for their transgression. There is "no distinction" since Jews and Gentile have both sinned (Rom 3:22-23). But on the flip side, there is "no distinction between Jew and Greek" in God's saving action in Christ because "one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" and "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him" (Rom 10:9, 12). God is the God of Jews and Gentiles and "he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith (Rom 3:30). Paul describes Abraham as the forefather of all believers, whether Jewish or Gentile, since God's "purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised" (Rom 4:11-12).

I need to stress that this is not unity as an abstract idea; this is unity for those who live a tenuous existence in the tenement house churches in Rome, where disease, destitution, and death are only ever a few hours away. This is unity where Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, have received a hostile treatment from Roman synagogues for their messianic faith. This is unity amidst the expulsion and return of Jewish Christian leaders to the city of Rome in 49 and 54 AD, which undoubtedly affected the

¹ Andrew Perriman, "What's wrong with the 'Romans Road' to Salvation?" 25 May 2012. <http://www.postost.net/2012/05/what-s-wrong-romans-road-salvation>. Cited 4 Aug 2017.

social dynamics in the Roman churches in the interim (see Acts 18:1-2). This is unity in a context where it would have been easy for Christian Gentiles to imbibe and replicate the anti-Jewish ethos of Roman elites who despised the Jews for being distinctive, different, insulated, and separated from wider society. This is unity when there was dispute and difference as to whether the regulations of the Torah remained incumbent on all believers. This is unity at a time when the Roman churches could potentially fragment along either ethnic lines or according to divisions over Torah observance.

This is why the climax of the letter, the summit of Paul's exhortation, is Rom 15:7-9, which reads:

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

Paul's point here is that the Messiah came to serve the Jews, to make good the divine promises to Israel, and to the patriarchs, so that Abraham might have a multi-ethnic family united in faith. The end the result is that the Gentiles would actually get saved, glorify God for his mercy, and obtain the obedience of faith. Accordingly, if the Messiah has welcomed Jews and Gentiles into the family of Abraham, drawn them into God's electing purposes, made them members of his own body, the church, then they must welcome one another!

What does this kind of church look like today? Well imagine if a small church, either in the inner-city or perhaps in a rural town, had an influx of Christian refugees from Syria and Sudan. Imagine if they came to this church, to your church, with their strange language, their recent experience of trauma, with strange ideas about worship, peculiar customs, personal complaints about things like having a US flag in the church, or an insistence that the minister should wear robes. Would you segregate them? Let them worship by themselves in the church hall after the main service with all the nice normal American folks? Even worse, what happens if more and more refugees arrive, take out membership, and suddenly you've got all these Syrians and Sudanese becoming the majority? You are only one congregational vote from changing your name from Fifth Baptist Church to St. John Chrysostom Community Church!

Well, this is what Romans is about! This is where you have to figure out how to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom 14:19), discern how

“each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (Rom 15:2), and above all consider how you can live in “harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 15:5-6).

Rather than allowing our churches to be tribally divided, ghettocized by race or class, Paul’s vision in Romans is for the lordship of Jesus Christ to be expressed in a physical expression of unity, amidst ethnic diversity and theological differences, so that everyone might glorify God for his mercy. Paul’s letter to the Romans tell us a lot about salvation, but it is principally about how the saved, Jews and Gentiles, Americans and Arabs, Africans and Latinos, are drawn closer together as they are drawn closer towards Jesus Christ.

To prove this, let’s start reading Romans backwards.