



I

GETTING OUR BEARINGS IN ROMANS

This chapter is to help the preacher get into Romans. It is not a suggestion for how to begin a teaching series. Indeed it would be better not to start a teaching series with the material in this chapter. Few things start a teaching series more dully than a long introduction about matters like the precise date of writing, and where Paul was writing from. There is a place for this careful scholarly work, but church Bible teaching is usually not it. The danger, apart from inducing boredom, is that our hearers get the impression that Bible reading cannot really begin until we have completed what feels like a rather dull jigsaw puzzle.

On the contrary, we need to show people that profitable Bible reading begins with careful Bible reading, reading the letter attentively as it stands. We want to show people that the youngest Christian can read Romans and profit by it. Of course we thank God for those who translate it reliably and for those who, as it were, take us by the hand and guide us through the letter and link it to other parts of Scripture. But



the aim of scholars who do this is to put the Bible into the hands of the ordinary Christian reader. In this we are the heirs of the great Bible translators, whose aim was famously put by William Tyndale when he said to a smug cleric that before long he would make the ploughman know more of the Bible than the clergyman. In our Bible teaching we are to continue what Tyndale began, putting the Bible into the hands of those we teach so that they may read it for themselves and be blessed in their reading.

It is a useful exercise, before embarking on teaching Romans, to read the whole letter aloud (preferably more than once), making a note of indications which tell us either about the writer and his circumstances or about the readers and their church. This will help us get a feel for the letter as a whole. It doesn't matter very much exactly when Paul wrote it, or where he wrote it from. But it matters a great deal to know about the people to whom he wrote it, and what was going on with them, and therefore why he wrote it (which is the subject of the next chapter).

Where and when in Paul's ministry did he write Romans?

Having said this, it is not difficult to get a rough idea of where Romans fits in to Paul's life. In 15:19-23 he says he has preached the gospel 'from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum' (roughly modern-day Albania) and that 'there is no more place for me to work in these regions.' Presumably he has completed the three missionary journeys recorded in Acts, in which he has planted churches in much of modern-day Turkey, Greece and Macedonia. He also says (15:25) that he is about to take an aid collection to the Christians in Jerusalem. This is the journey recorded in Acts 20 and 21

(confirmed in Acts 24:17, where he says that this journey was 'to bring my people gifts for the poor').

It took quite a while (and significant expense) to write a letter the length of Romans. You had to employ someone actually to write what you had composed, and writing was laborious and slow. For Romans this scribe was Tertius ('who wrote down this letter' 16:22). Usually you composed a draft and then corrected it before the final version was written out, so it was not easy to do while travelling. Probably Paul wrote it during the three months he spent in Greece (Acts 20:2, 3). Most likely he was in Corinth, the capital of Achaia, a city Paul knew well. There are several hints in the letter that it was written from Corinth. In 16:1 Paul commends to them Phoebe, 'a servant of the church in Cenchreae' (the eastern port of Corinth); Phoebe may have carried the letter to Rome, since he asks them to 'receive her in the Lord' (16:2). In 16:23 he sends greetings from his host Gaius, who may be the Gaius Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14), and also from Erastus, 'the city's director of public works' (c.f. 2 Tim. 4:20, where Erastus 'stayed in Corinth' presumably to do his job). So Paul probably used these three months in Corinth among friends as the stable base from which to write Romans.

We are therefore to picture Paul as an experienced missionary church-planter with 25 years or more of pastoral experience (which is important, as we shall see). Not only has he known Jesus Christ for many years, he also knows how people 'tick' and how churches work. He has the heart and head of an experienced pastor. In particular, he understands (as every pastor ought) how doctrine is applied by preaching to change churches.

What do we know about the churches in Rome? Paul writes (1:7) 'To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints,' that is, to all the Christians in Rome. Probably there was more than one assembly. Certainly there was one in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (16:5). Paul has 'planned many times to come to you' (1:13) and indeed has been longing 'for many years to see you' (15:23), so these are not brand-new churches; they have a history, and this history is an important reason why he writes, as we shall see. Although Paul has not been to Rome, he knows a lot about them, as we can gather from the extraordinarily full and detailed list of greetings, the longest of all Paul's letters (16:1-16).

We know nothing about how the Christian faith came to Rome. In view of the principle of 15:20 it seems unlikely he would wish to 'muscle in' on churches founded by Peter, and so it seems likely that ordinary Christians such as merchants or civil servants brought the gospel to Rome on their travels.

The most important thing to know about the make-up of the churches in Rome is that they contained both Christians from a Jewish background and Christians from a Gentile background. Scholars discuss what sort of mix there might have been, and tend to think that there was probably a Gentile Christian majority. But clearly both were present. In 15:7 he tells them to 'accept (i.e. welcome) one another', and the context in 15:8-13 makes it clear that 'one another' here means Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In 2:17 he addressed the 'Jew' (presumably meaning the Christian Jew, since he is writing to Christians, 1:7). Likewise in 4:1 he calls Abraham literally 'our forefather according to the flesh', which would only be true for Jews. And in 11:13 he speaks explicitly to 'you Gentiles'



(that is, Gentile Christians). As we work through the letter we shall see that this mix of Jew and Gentile is enormously important (e.g. 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:29; 9:24; 10:12).

One other fact is relevant. In Acts 18:2 Luke tells us that Paul met the Jewish Christians Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, because the emperor 'Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.' This may be because of civil disorder caused by the preaching of Christ, as the Roman historian Suetonius hints. Probably Claudius expelled all the Jews, Christian and non-Christian alike (he would not have been interested in the difference) in about A.D. 49. Claudius' edict of expulsion would have lapsed on his death in A.D. 54. Many expelled Jews presumably returned after that; there was a flourishing Jewish community in Rome under his successor Nero (A.D. 54–68). By the time Paul writes Romans (perhaps about A.D. 57) Priscilla and Aquila are back in Rome (Rom. 16:3).

We are therefore to understand a church founded some years before as the gospel was brought to Rome by Christian merchants or civil servants. Presumably it began mostly with converts from Jewish or God-fearing backgrounds associated with the synagogue. The gospel spread to other Gentiles. Then the Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome for a few years, leaving the Gentile Christians in charge. But after Claudius' death they came back. It does not take much imagination to see the tensions this expulsion and return might have caused, and we shall return to it in the next chapter.

The big structure of Romans

(See the diagram p. 18)

Romans begins and ends with a Frame, sections at the start and end that are very specific about the sender, the



recipients, the reason for writing, and so on. This Frame encloses the doctrinal and ethical Body of the letter. The Frame begins in 1:1-15 with the greeting (1:1-7) and a word about how and why Paul is longing to preach the gospel to them (1:8-15). It ends (15:14-16:27) with Paul explaining further why he has written, what are his hopes, and a long section of personal greetings.

We may divide the Body of the letter into four main parts. First, from 1:16-4:25 he expounds the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone (beginning with two 'manifesto' verses in 1:16, 17); I have called this 'Coming under grace'. Then in chapters 5-8 he builds on that foundation (5:1 'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith ...') to teach about the Christian life, the life of the man or woman who has been justified by faith; I have called this 'Living under grace'. In chapters 9-11 he builds from the climax of chapter 8 to teach about the wise grace of God as it overflows from Jew to Gentile and then back again to Jew; I have called this 'The overflow of grace'. Finally, in 12:1-15:13 he appeals to them all by the mercies of God that he has expounded in the letter so far, to offer themselves as a living sacrifice, and teaches them what this will mean in their life as a church; I have called this 'A church shaped by grace'.

In many ways the most important question with which we must grapple as we teach Romans is how the Frame relates to the Body. The Frame is very important to help us grasp why Paul writes the letter, and therefore why he expounds the doctrines he does in the way he does. We shall explore this in the next chapter.

A word about the style of Romans

Romans is a logical letter. But it is not linear. It is sometimes thought that Paul's argument goes strictly from one



point to the next. But it is not as simple as that. In particular it is worth being aware of his technique of 'trailing'. Just as a trailer will whet the appetite for an upcoming movie, so Paul will sometimes introduce a subject briefly in preparation for expanding on it later. Here are two examples:

1. In 6:13, 19 he tells his readers to 'offer' themselves to God to be used by God. He doesn't expand on this until chapter 12, which begins with the same command to 'offer' themselves to God (12:1).
2. A more sustained example is the ministry of the Spirit. Chapter 8 is the great place where he speaks fully about this ministry in the believer. But he has already anticipated this ministry in 2:29, 5:5, and 7:6 (and I think implicitly also in 2:6-15).

So when reading Romans do not assume that the argument is always strictly linear; watch out for the trailers.



