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Introduction to Dr. Tom Constable and His Bible Study (Expository) Notes

Dr. Constable is one of the most respected and beloved teachers of God's Word at Dallas Theological Seminary, and he has served as a Bible teacher and elder at Plano Bible Chapel for many years. Learn more about him at: www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm. You can explore the rest of the Sonic Light website by left-clicking in the top lighthouse graphic to return to Sonic Light's homepage, or click on one of the tabs to see other pages:

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NOTES ON ROMANS

2008 EDITION

DR. THOMAS L. CONSTABLE

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout the history of the church, from post-apostolic times to the present, Christians have regarded Romans as having been one of the Apostle Paul's epistles.¹ Not only does the letter claim that he wrote it (1:1), but it develops many of the same ideas and uses the same terminology that appear in Paul's earlier writings (e.g., Gal. 2; 1 Cor. 12; 2 Cor. 8—9).



Following his conversion on the Damascus Road (A.D. 34), Paul preached in Damascus, spent some time in Arabia, and then returned to Damascus. Next he traveled to Jerusalem where he met briefly with Peter and James. He then moved on to Tarsus, which was evidently his base of operations and from which he ministered for about six years (A.D. 37-43). In response to an invitation from Barnabas he moved to Antioch of Syria where he served for about five years (A.D. 43-48). He and Barnabas then set out on their so-called first missionary journey into Asia Minor (A.D. 48-49). Returning to Antioch Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians to strengthen the churches that he and Barnabas had just planted in Asia Minor (A.D. 49). After the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Paul took Silas and began his second missionary journey (A.D. 50-52) through Asia Minor and on westward into the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. From Corinth, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians (A.D. 51). He proceeded to Ephesus by ship and then on to Syrian Antioch. From there he set out on his third missionary journey (A.D. 53-57). Passing through Asia Minor he arrived in Ephesus where he labored for three years (A.D. 53-56). During this time he wrote 1 Corinthians (A.D. 56). Finally Paul left Ephesus and traveled by land to Macedonia where he wrote 2 Corinthians (A.D. 56). He continued south and spent the winter of A.D. 56-57 in Corinth. There he wrote the Epistle to the Romans and sent it by Phoebe (16:1-2) to the Roman church.

The apostle then proceeded from Corinth by land clockwise around the Aegean Sea back to Troas in Asia where he boarded a ship and eventually reached Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, the Jews arrested Paul and imprisoned him (A.D. 57). He arrived in Rome as a prisoner and ministered there for two years (A.D. 60-62). During this time he wrote the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). The Romans freed Paul, and he returned to the Aegean area. There he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus, experienced arrest again, suffered imprisonment in Rome a second time, wrote 2 Timothy, and died as a martyr under Nero in A.D. 68.²

We know very little about the founding of the church in Rome. According to Ambrosiaster, a church father who lived in the fourth century, an apostle did not found it (thus discrediting the Roman Catholic claim that Peter founded the church). A group of Jewish Christians did.³ It is possible that these Jews became believers in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10) or at some other time quite early in the church's history. By the time Paul wrote Romans the church in Rome was famous throughout the Roman Empire for its faith (1:8).

PURPOSE

Paul wrote this epistle under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for several reasons.⁴ He wanted to prepare the way for his intended visit to the church (15:22-24). He evidently hoped that Rome would become a base of operations and support for his pioneer missionary work in Spain and the western portions of the empire that he had not yet evange-

lized. His full exposition of the gospel in this letter would have provided a solid foundation for their participation in this mission.

As Paul looked forward to returning to Jerusalem between his departure from Corinth and his arrival in Rome, he was aware of the danger he faced (15:31). He may have written the exhaustive exposition of the gospel that we have in Romans to set forth his teaching in case he did not reach Rome. From Rome his doctrine could then go out to the rest of the empire as others preached it. Paul may have viewed Romans as his legacy to the church, his last will and testament.

Another reason for writing Romans was undoubtedly Paul's desire to minister to the spiritual needs of the Christians in Rome even though they were in good spiritual condition (15:14-16). The common problems of all the early churches were dangers to the Roman church as well. These difficulties included internal conflicts, mainly between Jewish and Gentile believers, and external threats from false teachers. Paul gave both of these potential problems attention in this epistle (15:1-8; 16:17-20).

“He felt that the best protection against the infection of false teaching was the antiseptic of the truth.”⁵

Paul also wrote Romans as he did because he was at a transition point in his ministry, as he mentioned at the end of chapter 15. His ministry in the Aegean region was solid enough that he planned to leave it and move farther west into new virgin missionary territory. Before he did that, he planned to visit Jerusalem where he realized he would be in danger. Probably, therefore, Paul wrote Romans as he did to leave a full exposition of the gospel in good hands if his ministry ended prematurely in Jerusalem.

“The peculiar position of the apostle at the time of writing, as he reviews the past and anticipates the future, enables us to understand the absence of controversy in this epistle, the conciliatory attitude, and the didactic and apologetic elements which are all found combined herein.”⁶

The great contribution of this letter to the body of New Testament inspired revelation is its reasoned explanation of how God's righteousness can become man's possession.

The Book of Romans is distinctive among Paul's inspired writings in several respects. It was one of the few letters he wrote to churches with which he had had no personal dealings. The only other epistle of this kind was Colossians. It is also a formal treatise within a personal letter.⁷ Paul expounded on the gospel in this treatise. He probably did so in this epistle rather than in another because the church in Rome was at the heart of the Roman Empire. As such it was able to exert great influence in the dissemination of the gospel. For these two reasons Romans is more formal and less personal than most of Paul's other epistles.

The Epistle to the Romans is, by popular consent, the greatest of Paul's writings. William Tyndale, the great English reformer and translator, referred to Romans as "the principle and most excellent part of the New Testament." He went on to say the following in his prologue to Romans that he wrote in the 1534 edition of his English New Testament.

"No man verily can read it too oft or study it too well; for the more it is studied the easier it is, the more it is chewed the pleasanter it is, and the more groundly [*sic*] it is searched the preciouser [*sic*] things are found in it, so great treasures of spiritual things lieth hid therein."⁸

Martin Luther wrote the following commendation of this epistle.

"[Romans] is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes."⁹

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:1-2.
- 2 See the appendix "Sequence of Paul's Activities" at the end of these notes for more details.
- 3 William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. xxv.
- 4 See Philip R. Williams, "Paul's Purpose in Writing Romans," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:509 (January-March 1971):62-67; Walter B. Russell, III, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:578 (April-June 1985):174-84; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 16-22.
- 5 William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, p. xxii.
- 6 W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 20.
- 7 For a discussion of the literary genre of Romans, see Robert E. Longacre and Wilber B. Wallis, "Soteriology and Eschatology in Romans," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:3 (September 1998):367-82.
- 8 Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, p. 9.
- 9 Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle to the Romans" (1522), cited by Moo, p. 22.