

## NOTES ON ROMANS 1

### 1:1-7

(1) Paul identifies himself as a “slave of Jesus Christ” and an “apostle called” (1:1).  
a. The Roman context: imperial officials often had the title “slave of Caesar”  
b. A slave was only the agent of his or her master—Paul’s emphasis falls on his ministry as being authorized by Christ.  
c. This raises the question of authority: Who is in charge of the world?  
d. “Apostle” comes from the Greek verb “to send”; an apostle is a representative or ambassador. This status rests on election.

(2) “The gospel of God”: the gospel derives from God, the same God revealed in the history of Israel (1:2). This gospel was proclaimed beforehand in Israel’s scriptures by prophets (meaning all through whom God spoke—remember that in Judaism Moses was the ultimate prophet).

(3) 1:3-4: These verses may be cited from an early creed, expressing the belief that Jesus is the promised Davidic messiah but whom the resurrection reveals to have also been the Son of God. In the resurrection Jesus’ pre-resurrection identity is revealed. The gospel is principally about Jesus Christ who is the Sovereign of the world; this is the significance of the title “Lord”.

(4) 1:5 stresses the connection between the risen Lord and Paul’s apostolic ministry. Grace (*charis*) is access to God without qualification, favor given without some type of exchange. Note that Paul thinks of faith and obedience as essentially being synonymous (cf. 16:26). The obedience he has in mind is produced by the gospel. Note also the scope of Paul’s missionary calling to “all the nations”. Romans is an invitation to participate in a global mission.

(5) “Called to be saints” (1:7): The house churches in Rome are addressed in accordance to their central reality—what is it that holds the geographically and ethnically diverse churches together? The one calling that they have from God to holiness. This anticipates the theme of chapters 5-8.

### 1:8-12

(1) 1:8-10: Paul thinks of all believers as interconnected such that the spread of the faith in Rome is good news for all Christians. This interconnectedness manifests itself in many ways, one way is intercessory prayer. His visit to Rome is something which Paul understands to have been made possible by God—it is not a random undertaking or a courtesy call.

(2) Note that in 1:11-12 Paul understands his relationship to the Roman house churches to be reciprocal—the parts of the Body are mutually sustaining.

**1:13-15**

(1) 1:13 notes that Paul had intended to visit Rome for some time (cf. 15:23).

(2) The visit to Rome is directly related to Paul's apostolic, missionary vocation. The reference to a "harvest" is probably a reference to the mission to the Gentiles. 15:28-29 indicates that Paul hopes that the Romans will fund his mission to Spain.

(3) The scope of Paul's mission explodes the cultural categories of Greek and barbarian. Greeks (and Latin speakers) were thought to be civilized, cultured and rational while barbarians (anyone outside the Greco-Roman world) were thought to be uncivilized, uncultured and sub-human, not capable of rationality. Paul insists that the gospel is for all and transcends such human distinctions.

(4) Paul's mission is to take him to what was then regarded as the end of the world—Spain.

**1:16-17**

(1) 1:16: Addresses a crucial issue—the gospel of a crucified messiah would have been inherently shameful in the Greco-Roman world. (The ultimate purpose of crucifixion was to inflict a shameful death.) The cross appears to demean God. Paul refuses to live within the cultural strictures of shame and honor (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

(2) The word gospel was not originally a Christian word—it was used to designate the rule of Augustus Caesar and the beginning of successive emperors who took to themselves the titles of Savior and Lord. Paul's alternative use of gospel to refer to a crucified Galilean rabbi raises profound questions about power.

(3) For Paul, gospel designates God's restoration of his righteous sovereignty over his disobedient creation—the restoration has been effected in Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospel of Christ crucified overturns the whole Roman imperial system of honor/shame and conquest.

(4) "To everyone who believes" (1:16): Paul's understanding of faith is essentially communal—to believe is to be incorporated into the alternative human order that God has established in Christ (the Church). Faith refers to an on-going orientation to God, an orientation which motivates all behavior.—it is not merely a set of opinions or feelings. "The power of God for salvation" (1:16): salvation means the restoration of all creation (cf. Romans 8), deliverance from evil power and sin and deliverance from God's righteous wrath. The power of God overturns all cultural claims to superiority.

(5) "The Righteousness of God": an eschatological term which refers to God's loyalty to and sovereignty over his creation. Human salvation and the integrity of creation are predicated upon

this. The righteousness of God is seen, in part, in a granted obedience among human beings. The Church is the beachhead of God's re-creation of humanity.

(6) "Revealed from faith for faith" or "beginning and ending with faith" (1:17): faith is the appropriation of God's saving power. This has to be qualified in two senses. First, faith is itself made possible by God and, second, faith is not a static entity but is manifested in increasing obedience.

(7) "The righteous shall live by faith" (1:17; cited from Habbakuk 2:4): Here righteous has the sense of "one who has been put right with God".

### **1:18-23**

(1) Paul's argument in this section is this: The Cross reveals the human tendency to suppress the truth about God and even to wage war (unsuccessfully) against him. The denial of God in favor of human systems produces cultures which are in a state of God-denial and God-suppression. For Paul, this can be seen in both the Roman Empire and in ethnocentric Judaism.

(2) The objects of God's wrath are human "impiety" and "wrongdoing"—these terms are not merely synonymous. Impiety was considered a horrible thing in the Greco-Roman world and was failure to respect deity. Impiety is an attitude not simply an action. For Paul, the essence of sin is the suppression of the truth about God.

(3) Paul's idea that knowledge of God is available to all through creation would have gone against both Greco-Roman religion (which supposed that only the wise really had knowledge of the gods) and Judaism (which supposed that pagans had no real knowledge of the true God). This claim makes Paul's indictment universal—there is not excuse for the human suppression of the truth about God.

(4) 1:21-23: Defines the essence of sin. Glorifying God was thought to be the principal responsibility of any Jew, and this meant acknowledging God as God. The restoration of this is the goal of the Gospel—to transform human being from being God-deniers to God glorifiers. Life which does not take God into account is inevitably drawn into self-degradation and self-destruction. The catalogue in 1:26-32 is not merely a list of vices but a list of symptoms indicating the ways in which creation has been badly distorted by human sin. Quite simply Paul's argument is that when God is not properly acknowledged, the capacity for understanding in human being is disabled.

### **1:24-32**

(1) The theme of this section is difficult to miss. The phrase "God gave them up" occurs three times (1:24, 26 28) and in Greek is sometimes a technical expression for the handing over of a criminal for punishment. Those who choose to suppress the truth about God are required to live out the consequences of desires and patterns of thought which become twisted.

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(2) Paul's argument (which is worked out from 2:1-3:20) places all of humanity essentially on the same level, Jew and pagan, Greek and barbarian. All of humankind is at some level involved in worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (1:25).

(3) Paul's claim is not that every person manifests all the "dishonorable passions" (1:26) in this catalogue but that their presence within the human community demonstrates that humankind is driven by unnatural passions and a debased mind.