

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## What is the Unifying Principle?

*Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name: (Romans 1:3-5)*

Any rational study of Biblical doctrine must necessarily begin with God. Our generation has seen far too much of the toxic consequences of pseudo-Christians who put man generally, or more often self in particularly, at the center of the spiritual universe. Theologians admire Paul's systematic pattern of writing, often using his Roman letter as the prime example. I comfortably join that number. I offer two principles that are paramount to a realistic and harmonious discovery of Biblical truth.

1. Before beginning to interpret any New Testament passage, discover the purpose of the letter, the true "big picture" idea that prompted the inspired writer to invest significant time, effort, and often money to communicate this specific message with all of its content and nuances to this specific audience. Who is the writer? Who is the audience? Why did this particular writer compile this specific message for this unique audience? Most, if not all, New Testament letters or books are "occasional letters." That is, some event, problem, or difficult "occasion" needed correction or attention, and the author wrote to deal with the catalyzing "occasion." If we do not accurately discover the underlying occasion that prompted the letter, all the word chases and pretended contextual studies in the world cannot unfold the passage correctly and sensibly to our minds.
2. As the writer compiled his unique message to this specific original audience, what unifying principle brings all the various issues and ideas together into a meaningful and

functional whole that clearly addresses the primary "occasion" or problem and offers a godly solution to that problem?

The Roman letter is profoundly theological. As the verses quoted indicate, Paul is writing to the Roman Christians/church (or churches) regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. In these short verses he develops ideas that touch the Incarnation, the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, including His full equality with the Father, the "spirit of holiness" (indicating the moral character of God), and the resurrection of Christ; all set forth as the foundation from which Paul writes as an apostle intending to proclaim and incite obedience to the faith to all peoples, not just to Jews.

Each of us will reveal something of our personality and thinking styles as we write, especially if we write extensively as Paul did—approximately thirty per cent of the New Testament text. Paul displays a rather unique style in his writing. He aims at emphatic clarity. In order to reinforce this clarity Paul typically "book-ends" his primary message near the beginning and the ending of each of his letters. If we want to accurately interpret and understand any of his letters, our first objective should be to identify his primary "book-end" idea. It will bring cohesion, purpose, and clarity to the whole content of that particular letter.

One of the major strengths of the typical "systematic theology" is ironically also one of its major weakness, the isolation and intensive development of a single doctrine at a time. Quite the opposite, Scripture develops Biblical doctrines as tightly woven themes and patterns, carefully integrated into a single whole. The Roman letter

clearly exemplifies this pattern. Paul will delve deeply into the profound depths of eternal truth that relates to God's eternal purpose and our eternal salvation, but within that same context he may weave equally pertinent insights and teachings that deal with the Christian life and ethic to be consistently lived out by each of those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me illustrate the point.

1. What is Paul's "book-end" idea in the Roman letter? In Romans 1:8-13 Paul indicates knowledge of and admiration for the Romans. He tells them of his desire and imminent purpose to visit them. Given the distance and available means of travel in first century Mediterranean regions, such a lengthy trip would be both timely and costly. While Romans chapter sixteen forms a distinct part of the Roman letter, structurally it is a thematic postscript, sending greetings and words of encouragement to various individuals. In terms of Paul's primary purpose in writing, the thematic message ends with the fifteenth chapter. So where is the bookend? I offer that Romans 15:22-24 takes us back to the precise point that appears in the first chapter, Paul's desire to visit the Romans, but it also indicates his desire to travel west beyond Rome to Spain. First he must take the collection to the suffering saints in Jerusalem, after which he hopes to visit the Romans. There is a subtle indication that he will need their financial support to accomplish these desires. We also see hints that internal problems at Rome might hinder this support. Notice Romans 15:30 as Paul nudges the Romans to "...strive together with me" first in prayer, but likely in more than prayer as well. What is the implication? The embedded focus of the whole letter on the "Jew-Gentile" problem indicates that a major problem likely existed within the Roman church relating to these racial-cultural differences. Paul's functional message is an intense

exhortation for the Romans to settle their internal strife over racial or cultural differences and to focus their "strife" on prayerful and financial support for Paul and his ministry. Acts 18:2 specifically indicates that Claudius Caesar expelled all Jews from Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius writes of this event and tells us that the Jewish community in Rome became so embroiled in internal strife that Claudius simply expelled them all. What was the basis for such an intense strife within the Jewish community in Rome? The Roman historian indicates that it related to a difference of opinion regarding one "Chrestus," Christ. Ah, some Jews in Rome believed in Christ and were active members of the church in that city, while other Jews did not believe in Jesus. Thus we have both Scriptural and independent historical support for a major problem that precisely matches the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. Some time later, Jewish people were apparently allowed to return to Rome. When the Roman Christians returned to their church, do you suppose that some distinctly non-Jewish ideas or practices might have evolved during their absence? And how might they have reacted? This scenario clearly justifies the theme and content of Paul's Roman letter. We cannot say with unquestioned knowledge that this is the background, but it seems more than likely to be the case. So what is Paul's overarching and unifying message to the Romans? They can't strive with him in the gospel while they are striving with each other over irrelevant questions such as a presumed superiority of Jews over Gentiles or of Gentiles over Jews. Paul's greater message to the Romans is to "get their act together," end their internal strife, and support him and the work of the gospel. They could not invest in their strife while also supporting him. One strife must end for the other to be accomplished! The doctrinal

themes of the Roman letter affirm that being a Jew or a Gentile today is of no real consequence. Both are reconciled to God on the same basis, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, so they needed to forget this superficial difference and unify themselves in the work of the gospel.

2. What is the unifying thematic foundation for Paul's Roman letter? He covers major theological issues, at times more fully and intensely than in almost any other letter that he wrote. At other times he is equally emphatic in his exhortations to the Romans regarding their personal conduct. What single unifying theme can we identify that brings these rather diverse themes together into a united and integrated whole? I suggest that Paul introduces that unifying theme in our passage, "...according to the spirit of holiness..." As Paul introduces each theological point throughout the Roman letter, *he will repeatedly build the doctrinal truth that he teaches on a single premise, the moral character of God.* Paul wrote the Roman letter, indeed most of his letters, in the literary form of ancient dialectical reasoning. He knows that his ideas will not be universally accepted, so he reasons with those who oppose him with integrity and clarity. Often in Romans you will get the sense that you are listening to a conversation between Paul and someone else. In fact you are. Paul would have detested the typical "straw man" argumentation of our culture in which one person inaccurately depicts a phony and imprecise interpretation of another person's beliefs, and then attacks and dismantles the phony "straw man." If we were to read Paul's critics' response to his depiction of their ideas, we would be surprised to hear them congratulate him for understanding and representing their ideas so accurately.

Perhaps the single most crucial point to a correct understanding of Paul's letter to the

Romans appears in our keeping this unifying truth of God's moral character clearly present in our minds as we study every verse and every doctrine that Paul develops in the Roman letter. Whether dealing with the function of the gospel (as in the first chapter) or the difficult but altogether Biblical doctrine of election (as in the ninth chapter), Paul repeatedly builds his doctrinal teachings on this unifying foundation of God's moral character. Further, he will build his exhortations to godly conduct on the same bedrock truth. If God is altogether moral, consistent, and ethical in every aspect of His Person and work, we should expect that He will require those who profess faith in Him to practice that same moral ethics in their personal lives.

Paul presents the doctrines of grace as God's ethical response to sin. He understands love as the moral principle driving the ethics presented in these doctrines. God foreknew; He foreloved, and acted ethically on His love by predestinating, calling, justifying and glorifying. However, all of these ethical behaviors occurred out of the sight and knowledge of man. When Christ came, He revealed by his behavior a perfect expression of God's morality. In ethical terms His death at Calvary was the crowning example of the ethical morality of that love. Among other things, His resurrection also signifies God's approval of Christ's exemplary ethics, God's ethical reaction to Christ's perfect obedience. In the Roman letter Paul weaves the ethics of God's character into a narrative of how Christians are to treat one another. Furthermore, he explains how God responds to our faithful practice of his moral character in the tenets of justification by faith by giving us assurance of our hope of the resurrection.

Further, if we believe in the inspiration of Scripture, *its supernatural origin and its supernatural preservation*, we must not interpret any passage or doctrine in such a way as to create contradiction between two distinct doctrines. For example, people who are inclined toward fatalism or determinism (the idea that God either positively causes or instrumentally and morally "permits" every event in human history, even sin) will typically interpret Romans 8:28 to mean that every event that occurs in human history is in some mystical way used by God both for

His glory and for the good of godly people. When challenged with the obvious contradiction of sinful actions relating in any positive manner with the being and character of God, advocates of this doctrine will typically appeal to God's "secret will." They imply a diametrical contradiction in the moral character of God and then attempt to relieve the contradiction by the idea of a "secret will" of God. No such idea even remotely appears in Scripture, so any argument that imposes moral contradiction upon God and then tries to relieve the contradiction by an appeal to His supposed "secret will" is in fact a non-argument. If we interpret Romans 8:28 to include the wicked acts of men, whether by divine cause or by divine "permission (the idea that God in some way gives "permission" or approval to sinful acts, even if He does not cause them per se)," we create an impossible contradiction between that passage and Romans 3:1-8 where Paul specifically reasons between God's righteousness and man's sin. If God must rely on man's sin to magnify His righteousness, He hopelessly loses the moral high ground from which He may righteously judge human sin at the final Judgment. *How can He judge sin and punish sinners if He had to rely on them for magnification and affirmation of His righteousness?* Many readers will skim over the Romans 3 passage and barely perceive more than an apparent and confusing view that borders on sanctified double speak. In this lesson Paul specifically and directly rejects the idea that God's righteousness in any way relies on man's sin for assistance or for glory. A simple consideration of Paul's foundational and unifying theme of God's moral character for every point made in the Roman letter will steer us through both passages and avoid theological shipwreck in either context.

To view God as sovereign and yet not the cause of—or at least giving passive permission to—every act and event of human history is not a contradiction. Nor is it the basis for an aloof deistic view of God, the typical "straw man" argument raised by fatalistic advocates against this idea. When Paul specifically confronts both wicked people whom God did not elect to salvation, and their sinful deeds, in Romans 9:22 and context, he did not use either the term "permission" or the idea of God causing or

permitting their sin. "...*endured* with much *longsuffering*" categorically rejects the idea rather than endorsing it. Thus incorporating Paul's unifying theme of God's moral character, His holiness, into the whole fabric of the Roman letter will lead us to consistent and balanced interpretations of these various and, admittedly, difficult passages.

When I was working my way through my formal education, I repeatedly faced the frustrating and dominant existential view of the day from every one of my literature instructors. We were directed to read and study the various leading authors in the text, but in classroom discussions we were inevitably asked, "What does this piece *mean to you?*" I would have enjoyed my literature classes far more had these instructors avoided the typical existential philosophy that their question revealed. What the passage meant to me was fundamentally irrelevant! When the author wrote his thoughts, he didn't know that I would ever exist, much less care what I would think of his writing when I encountered it. The correct question would have been "What did the author himself mean? What did he intend by these words?" We should take that same attitude and question to Scripture as we examine it and seek a balanced, contextual, and reasonable interpretation of it for our own instruction.

We may develop our thoughts verse by verse in a given book of the Bible and think ourselves to be contextual and expository in our interpretation, but if we do not discover and keep the author's (more importantly *the divine Author's*) meaning in mind as we study, the results of our study will be as fragmented and unfaithful to the context as if we were still chasing words and confusing flat tires and elephant trunks.

I am convince that throughout Scripture we will discover consistent unifying themes and principles that will serve to lead us through the difficult passages and ideas with precision and balance, leading us to conclusions and doctrines that are internally harmonious and that consistently magnify and honor God and attribute deserved glory to Him alone. In Romans that unifying and under girding principle is God's moral character. We miss the mark with any interpretation or idea that remotely compromises God's moral character.

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