

Three factors prompt this re-examination of the underlying questions that shape mainstream exegesis of Paul's letters. Hermeneutical studies have destabilized assumptions about the nature of meaning in texts; the letters are usually characterized as pastoral but explicated as expressions of Paul's thought; and the impact of E. P. Sanders' work on Paul has sharpened exegetical problems in Romans 1.16–4.25. The outcome is a two-step method of exegesis that considers a letter first in the light of the author's purpose in creating it and second as evidence for the patterns of thought from which it sprang. The passage appears as pastoral preaching, helping the Romans to deal with the implications of the fact that the God of Israel is now accepting believing Gentiles on the same basis as believing Jews. Justification by grace through faith emerges as the theological understanding of God's action in Christ that grounds the pastoral speech.



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PURPOSE AND CAUSE IN PAULINE EXEGESIS



# Purpose and Cause in Pauline Exegesis

Romans 1.16–4.25 and  
a New Approach to the Letters

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## PREFACE

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i>
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, <i>Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner and R. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
BFT	Biblical Foundations in Theology
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EBib	Etudes bibliques
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FFNT	Foundations and Facets: New Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GNS	Good News Studies
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i>
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	G. A. Buttrick (ed.), <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>IDBSup</i>	Supplementary volume to <i>IDB</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>

<i>JBC</i>	R. E. Brown <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>The Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament – Supplement Series
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament – Supplement Series
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>LEC</i>	Library of Early Christianity
<i>MNTC</i>	Moffat New Testament Commentary
<i>NCB</i>	New Century Bible
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NIGTC</i>	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NovTSup</i>	Novum Testamentum, Supplements
<i>NTD</i>	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RNT</i>	Regensburger Neues Testament
<i>RSV</i>	Revised Standard Version
<i>SBLDS</i>	SBL Dissertation Series
<i>SBL SBS</i>	SBL Sources for Biblical Study
<i>SBT</i>	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SD</i>	Studies and Documents
<i>SJLA</i>	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SNTW</i>	Studies of the New Testament and its World
<i>SO</i>	<i>Symbolae Osloenses</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

# 1

## ASKING NEW EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS

The work reported in this study of Rom. 1.16–4.25 springs from two main issues. The first is the church's present alienation from the Bible, a widespread concern shared by many Christian NT scholars and affecting NT studies most obviously in hermeneutical questioning and experiment. The second is a concern that mainstream historical-critical study fails to take with full seriousness its own dictum that Paul's letters are *letters* and *pastoral* and must be treated as such. Many colleagues will consider this concern unnecessary, but if it is justified it means that the picture of Paul, his activity and his thought which emerges from mainstream scholarship is suffering significant distortion.

The starting point of the study is a confessional statement about scripture, using the language of our post-Enlightenment culture but in contrast with its secularity:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated . . . The Word of God on whom man's [*sic*] salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Engaging as scholar and minister with the problem of alienation from the Bible has led me to conclude that it is not the fault of biblical scholars or of the historical-critical method, although both are often blamed. Nor is it the Bible's fault, although the strangeness of documents that belong to cultures distant from us in time and space is often blamed. Differences of cosmology are a classic

<sup>1</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union*, par. 5.

example, and such problems are not trivial. Beside the real barrier, however, they seem small. In the world of the Bible, God is the Creator and God's purpose is being worked out. God is the measure of truth and justice. In present-day Western culture, God is a private option, an hypothesis that some people accept. The problem of the church's alienation from the Bible lies with the church. The church is too well embedded in the secular culture. This includes biblical scholars who own themselves and their work as part of the church, the body of Christ. Thus, the problem is an aspect of the struggle to be the church in the secular world, and there are no easy answers.

How, under God, can the church tackle the problem of alienation from the Bible? This would require another book. For our study, Newbigin offers a helpful statement:

[W]e get a picture of the Christian life as one in which we live *in* the biblical story as part of the community whose story it is, find in the story the clues to knowing God as his character becomes manifest in the story, and from within that indwelling try to understand and cope with the events of our time and the world about us and so carry the story forward. At the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus defines for his disciples what is to be their relation to him. They are to 'dwell in' him. He is not to be the object of their observation, but the body of which they are a part. As they 'indwell' him in his body, they will both be led into fuller and fuller apprehension of the truth and also become the means through which God's will is done in the life of the world.<sup>2</sup>

This shows how radical is the action needed. Of course, the church is already indwelling the biblical story by its very existence as a confessing, worshipping, caring people of God. Nevertheless, there is a need to know the story better and to become more at home in it, because Christians are socialized and educated into the conflicting world of our secular culture. What is the role of Christian NT scholars in this undertaking?

The confessional statement offers the affirmation that '[the]

<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 99.

Word of God on whom man's salvation depends is to be heard and known from scripture appropriated in the ... life of the Church'. The scripture is described as 'the books of the Old and New Testaments [received] as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony in which [the church] hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'. In this relationship, the church can grow towards living more fully 'in the biblical story'.

If Scripture is to be thus appropriated, Christians must first listen to the 'unique prophetic and apostolic testimony'. It is not a matter of wresting relevance from recalcitrant texts, and approaching Scripture in that spirit is likely to get in the way of hearing the Word of God.<sup>3</sup> The apostolic testimony participates in the historical particularity of the incarnation. The church needs to listen to it, simply to be open to it on its own terms. This is the beginning, not the end, of the process of appropriation. The Christian NT scholar can be an enabler of that listening.

This role definition brings us to the concern of historical-critical scholarship with understanding the text as John's, or Mark's, or Paul's. It demands knowledge of the language of the texts and of their historical, cultural and church contexts. It demands the discipline of being aware of our own presuppositions and circumstances, so that we guard against blurring the distinctive testimony of the writers with personal concerns and emphases. It follows the Enlightenment insistence that the texts are not unmediated revelation or pure theology, but human documents which must be treated accordingly – in Paul's case, as letters, as pastoral, and as Paul's. Further, this role definition can give a purpose and a shape to Christians' practice of historical-critical scholarship. The work is not done simply for the fascination of the chase, but in the service of the church's task of listening. It gives a measure of which questions are most important.

New Testament Studies exists as a discipline in the secular university, and is widely seen to have its integrity as a secular discipline into which the church must not intrude. On the other hand, the documents are scripture – NT – only in the context of the church's life, and the church needs independent-minded biblical scholarship, not at the service of immediate issues or of the church's power structures, but an activity of the body of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> With Stendahl, *Final Account*, 21.

This study examines Rom. 1.16–4.25. It is a scholarly study, offering to NT scholarship an alternative way of practising historical-critical exegesis on Paul's letters, and an alternative understanding of this important passage. It is also part of the scholarly work of enabling the church in its task of listening to Paul's apostolic testimony. It is not intended to provide the preacher with sermon material, but so to open up the text that believers may be helped to grapple with Romans and come to know it as part of their own life, part of their participation in the biblical story.

Listening to Paul's apostolic testimony sets us the same task of explicating the text as Paul's that is undertaken in mainstream historical-critical study. Here we encounter the concern that historical-critical scholarship is failing in its endeavour to take Paul's letters seriously as letters and as pastoral. The study opens up these issues, and a new approach to the text is developed. We are not rejecting the historical-critical method, but modifying the way it is usually practised on Paul's letters, especially by developing new or sharpened exegetical questions.

Questions are the most important tool of exegetes. Their skills and knowledge in the areas of the language and culture of the NT and the language and culture of biblical scholarship enable them to use the tools effectively. The basic exegetical tool is the question, What does this text mean? It is shattering to realize that exegetical experiment and hermeneutical study over several decades have broken it. The concept 'the meaning of the text' has been relativized. Is the meaning what the writer intended to say? Does meaning inhere in the structures of the text itself, independently of the writer's intention? Does meaning arise in the encounter between text and reader? A text like Romans yields meaning through readings based on any of these assumptions. When we consider short sections, a greater range is likely to open up. By what criteria can we decide what constitutes 'the meaning of the text'? If we cannot establish criteria, does the text offer an apparently infinite range of meaning, all of which is at our disposal?

This disabling of the question seems to paralyse us. We advance by recognizing that the blanket question corresponds poorly with actual practice. A text is a series of conventional marks on a sufficiently smooth surface. All our language about its meaning is metaphor. In reading texts in general we conceive the meaning in different ways, depending on the nature of the text and what we want to do with it. A comparison of poetry and instruction

manuals makes this obvious. If we find some Sumerian prayers, we feel fairly confident that their meaning for us as historical sources is different from their meaning for the Sumerians who prayed them. Thus, the fact that we are no longer sure how to go about answering the blanket question, What does Romans mean? forces our attention onto ourselves as readers. What kind of a text are we reading? Romans is a letter written as part of Paul's ministry and of the continuing life of the church of the fifties, with no thought that it would come to be scripture. What do we want to do with it? NT scholarship wants to listen to it as Paul's; the church wants to listen to it as part of Paul's apostolic testimony.

In both cases, we must take it very seriously as Paul's. This will move us into the world where God is not a private option, as far as we can be so moved. We must look at Paul's intention. He was writing a letter to the believers in Rome. Our first question, then, is, What was Paul intending to say to the Romans? This will not exhaust the meaning of the text as Paul's. We want to learn from it about Paul's understanding of the gospel, about Paul as a pastor and as a person. The NT scholar's wider task includes using Romans as a source for understanding the church and the world in which Paul wrote, but this limited study offers only an indirect contribution to that work.

We asked what kind of text we are reading and what we want to do with it. Our answers show that the model of meaning applicable here is meaning conceived as contained in the text and in some sense governed by the author's intention. Authorial intention is normally given considerable weight in considering the meaning of a letter. For scripture, this is much more debated. The moves we have made do not, of course, constitute any general answer to the puzzle about the meaning of meaning.

The study of Rom. 1.16–4.25 presented in chapters 2–12 has two aims: to make a substantial contribution to the understanding of the passage as Paul's, and to use it as a test case for developing a new historical-critical approach to Paul's letters. We shall consider carefully their character as letters and as pastoral, and the consequences of the breakdown of the question, What does this text mean? The aims are complementary, and they create interactive elements in the study. Chapter 13 is a review, considering particularly the wider application of the work.

We begin by examining the problems the passage raises.