
Assumptions of This Study

One might think there is nothing more to be written about Paul's Letter to the Romans. In fact, basic issues of an introductory nature are yet to be resolved. These issues do not have to do with authorship, date, or place of origin. Paul is the author, the date is around 57-58 CE, and the place of origin is presumably Corinth. There is general consensus that the text we have is the text of the letter Paul sent to Rome, with a possible exception being the doxology in 16:25-27. The unresolved issues have to do with the purpose of the letter, the audience being addressed, and the structure of the letter. This latter issue is the primary focus of my study. There is a "surface structure" that guides the discourse of the letter. To understand that structure is to understand the flow of thought of the letter and the coherence of its parts. Contrary to prevailing opinion, Romans is not a letter-essay or a diatribe meant to serve Paul's own self-interests such as preserving his gospel or answering his critics. Rather, Romans is a carefully constructed letter from Paul to the church in Rome, written to address a specific set of circumstances in Rome. This is the thesis of this study. Underlying this thesis is the conviction that the questions and answers in chapters 3-11 are guiding the flow of ideas and pointing

to issues of concern. The exhortations in chapters 12–15 are not general exhortations but paraenesis directed to specific circumstances in Rome. If acknowledged, this would represent a major shift for many in their approach to Romans. My purpose is to show what I consider to be the surface structure of the letter. It is rhetoric that interacts with the recipients, which it should if Romans is a letter written to address their circumstances. The surface structure guides the discourse of the letter and enables the listening audience to follow Paul's line of thought.

To arrive at the surface structure of the letter, some preliminary steps are needed. My first step will be to review outlines of Romans to probe whether they adequately convey the progression of Paul's thought. As a second step, I will seek to resolve the issue of whether the body of Romans is an essay or an actual letter interacting with its recipients. Having demonstrated the epistolary hallmarks of the letter, I will then show how the rhetoric provides the key for unlocking the progression of thought. From that point on, I will determine the surface structure of the letter, seek to resolve entrenched issues that remain, and attempt to explain the underlying circumstances in Rome that demanded Paul's attention. But let me begin by addressing the issues of purpose and audience and indicate where my preferences lie, for they influence my approach to the structure and interpretation of the letter.

The Purpose of Romans

There are multiple reasons given as to why Paul wrote Romans.¹ Some focus on circumstances surrounding Paul,² while others focus on

1. For an extended overview of views regarding the purpose of Romans, see Richard Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 92–166; see also Robert Jewett, *Romans, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 80–91; see also the monograph by A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).
2. Reasons for circumstances surrounding Paul include the following: to introduce himself to the church at Rome; to prepare for his coming visit; to establish a base for further missionary outreach to the west as far as Spain; to establish his authority over the Roman church as the apostle to the gentiles; to indoctrinate the Romans in the essential nature of the gospel; to write a coherent theological essay on major doctrines of theology, anthropology, Christology, and soteriology; to write his last will and testament; to write a brief prepared for Paul's defense when

circumstances surrounding the Christians in Rome.³ Scholars have referred to the pursuit of Paul's purpose as an "enigma"⁴ and "in a state of confusion."⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield reserves discussion of the purpose until the end of his commentary, seeking to arrive at his conclusion inductively. He refers to the letter as "a complex of purposes and hopes."⁶ It is safe to say that we need to be speaking not of Paul's purpose, but purposes (plural). Instead of choosing between Paul's "personal" self-interests and his "pastoral" interests in Rome, we need to consider multiple purposes combining both. The letter was written not only from a person but also to persons in Rome. If it was written only due to Paul's self-interests, that would be very unlike Paul. If it was written only due to circumstances in Rome, how do we account for the occasion of the letter and what Paul says about his desire to visit Rome and to proceed on to Spain? It is fair to assume that a primary purpose of Paul was to enlist support for his mission to bring about the obedience of faith among gentiles along the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

However, we should avoid the assumption that Paul's purpose for writing is to be found only in the bookends of the letter (1:1-17 and 15:14-16:27). Overemphasis on the bookend passages causes interpreters to divorce the body of the letter from the circumstances of believers in Rome. Do we really want to assume that the body of the letter was written solely to preserve Paul's theology or gospel from criticism (or some similar aim) without any concern for pressing issues

he arrives in Jerusalem; to write an encyclical letter to preserve his doctrine and gospel; and to defend himself from criticism and misunderstandings of his gospel.

3. Reasons proposed for addressing circumstances in Rome include the following: to oppose Jewish particularism, potential or actual; to counter a possible Judaizing threat in Rome; to bring about the obedience of faith of the gentiles in Rome; to effect reconciliation between "the strong" and "the weak"; to resolve conflict and bring unity to the factions in Rome; to counsel Christians regarding their relation to the Roman government and paying taxes; to impart some spiritual gift by applying the gospel to those in Rome (1:11-15).
4. Wedderburn, *Reasons for Romans*, 1. On p. 2 he writes, "The very plethora of suggestions and alternative perspectives offered may leave even the experienced students of Paul with a feeling of frustrated bewilderment."
5. Karl P. Donfried, "False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 102-24 (here 102).
6. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), essay 1, "Paul's Purpose or Purposes in Writing Romans," 2:814-23.

in Rome? I think not and would propose that the letter as a whole is designed to address the real-life issues in Rome.

Second, some have assumed that since Paul had never been to Rome, he could not have been addressing circumstances there. Franz Leenhardt writes, “Paul is not here concerned to remonstrate with Christians at Rome, whom he does not know any more than he knows their special problems.”⁷ Others have expressed similar sentiments that Paul had little or no knowledge of his audience. However, was Paul really that ignorant of the circumstances in Rome? Was communication between parts of the Roman Empire all that limited? Communication between Corinth and Ephesus was not limited, as evidenced in the Corinthian correspondence. Nor was travel limited between those cities. Consider how many were traveling with Paul from Corinth to Jerusalem.⁸ Think of all those who were with Paul at some point during his imprisonment in Rome (Luke, Tychicus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, and Demas).⁹ Could not the same level of correspondence and travel have taken place between Corinth and Rome? Paul was in or near Corinth when he wrote to Rome, and Rome was not that far away. He stayed with Prisca and Aquila when they were together in Corinth and had kept up with them (Acts 18:2-3, 18, 26; 1 Cor. 16:19; cf. 2 Tim. 4:19). Now they are in Rome. Paul had numerous friends in Rome, as evidenced in chapter 16.¹⁰ Was there no interaction between them? That would have been quite unlikely. Phoebe, who was from the nearby port city of Cenchreae, was about to travel to Rome. According to William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, “Never in the course of previous history had there been anything like the freedom of circulation and movement which now existed in the Roman Empire . . . and its general

7. Franz J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 345–46. William Barclay, Martin Dibelius, Günther Bornkamm, Everett F. Harrison, and a host of other scholars have held this same view.

8. Acts 20:4-5; there were at least eight, representing churches from Achaia, Macedonia, and Asia.

9. Acts 28; Phil. 2:19, 25; Col. 4:7-14; Philem. 23-24.

10. Notice the terms of endearment Paul uses to refer to so many in chapter 16: “beloved,” “helper,” “kinsmen,” my “mother,” “fellow prisoners,” “first convert in Asia.” Paul was clearly acquainted with those believers.

trend was to and from Rome.”¹¹ We can be quite assured that Paul was aware of what was happening in Rome.

A third assumption to be avoided is that the body of the letter is a theological essay or summary of the gospel addressing issues involving the gospel and justification and the law of God. For example, J. B. Lightfoot held that Romans was written at leisure, expanding his teaching in Galatians in a systematic way.¹² Günther Bornkamm calls it Paul’s “last will and testament,” in which he “summarizes and develops the most important themes and thoughts of his message and theology.”¹³ Werner Kümmel calls it a “theological confession” that sets forth Paul’s gospel, “the basic truths of Christianity as he sees and teaches it.”¹⁴ Some have held that since it was in essay form, it could and perhaps was sent to other churches as well, that it was a circular letter,¹⁵ or that its destination in addition to Rome was Ephesus.¹⁶ For support, they point to textual variants in Romans. One set of variants omits the words “in Rome.”¹⁷ The other set of variants relates to the placement or omission of benedictions and the doxology at the end of the letter, as well as a shortened form of the letter.¹⁸ There is also the

11. William Sanday, and Arthur C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), xxvi.
12. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 1865), 49.
13. Günther Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans as Paul’s Last Will and Testament,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. and expanded ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 16–28 (here 27–28).
14. Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 312–14. It should be noted that while Kümmel agrees with Bornkamm that the letter may be called a testament, he does allow that it is at the same time a concrete message to Christians in Rome. Cranfield (*Romans*, 23) contends that while the occasion of the letter is evident from its epistolary frame, it is less evident why Paul included 1:16b–15:13 in his letter. Then in an appendix of his commentary (ibid., 814–23), he concludes that the body of the letter is an orderly summary of his gospel as he had come to understand it. T. W. Manson (“St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans—and Others,” in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 3–15 [here 15]) describes Romans as “a manifesto setting forth his deepest convictions on central issues.”
15. Ernst Renan and Kirsopp Lake (as referenced by Longenecker, *Introducing Romans*, 99) held that the letter was a circular letter with distinct and appropriate endings sent to several churches. J. B. Lightfoot (*Biblical Essays* [London: Macmillan, 1893], 352, 374) suggested the letter was first written to Rome, but then later shortened to send to other churches.
16. Manson (“St. Paul’s Letter,” 13) contends that the original version of Romans was 1:1–15:33, and that chapter 16 was added and sent to Ephesus with the references to Rome in 1:7 and 15 omitted.
17. The phrase *en Rhōmē* is missing from 1:7, and *tois en Rhōmē* from 1:15 in the following ninth-to-eleventh-century manuscripts: G, 1739mg, 1908mg, itg. The omissions were probably made to make the letter appear to be addressed to a more general audience. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 505–6.
18. Regarding the variants at the end of the letter, see ibid., 533–36. Metzger suggests that the

view that while the letter was sent to Rome, the intended audience was really Jerusalem.¹⁹ Neil Elliott notes that for a majority of interpreters, the letter serves Paul's own self-interests (as he masterfully enumerates in this extended sentence; italics his):

to "show [the Romans] *in advance* what his gospel *will be*," to offer "an *example* of the kind of preaching or teaching he *will practice* when among them," "to present his gospel" to them so that they might "know more about its character and his mode of argumentation," to introduce to them "the teaching activity Paul *hopes to do* at Rome" or "the gospel *to be . . . proclaimed* [in Spain]," . . . to "[provide] a sustained account of his understanding of the gospel" to "justify his message and mission" by "clarifying and defending his beliefs," to "inform the church [in Rome] about his missionary theology" so that they would "know his thinking."²⁰

Elliott then responds, "Paul says nothing in the letter to indicate that he is presenting his own ideas to garner his readers' approval of himself or his mission."²¹

All the above views find Paul's purpose for writing not in the Roman situation but only in Paul himself at the time of writing.²² While we can hardly doubt that the circumstances of Paul account partly for his purpose of writing, I will show below that the letter was written not only from a specific situation but also to a specific situation. Karl Donfried's "Methodological Principle I" is this: "Any study of Romans

shortened form (omitting chapters 15–16 in certain Latin manuscripts) was probably due to Marcion or his followers. For a thorough discussion of the authenticity and integrity of the letter as we have it, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:1–11. Harry Gamble has shown that the textual variants are the result of a later process of "catholicizing" the Pauline corpus (*The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans*, SD 42 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977]; also Gamble, "The Redaction of the Pauline Letters and the Formation of the Pauline Corpus," *JBL* 94 (1975): 403–18 [here 414–18]). Some also find discrepancies between the opening and closing of the letter—the opening focusing on Paul's eagerness to evangelize and spend time in Rome, and the closing on his policy not to evangelize where others have done so and his plans to go to Spain.

19. Jacob Jervell ("The Letter to Jerusalem," in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 53–64) advocates that Romans was written in anticipation of the debates Paul would have when he arrived in Jerusalem with the collection. It is the defense he would make before the church in Jerusalem. The letter is addressed to Rome for the purpose of seeking their support and intercession on his behalf.

20. Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 17 (emphasis original).

21. *Ibid.*

22. Anders Nygren (*Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949], 4) writes, "The characteristic and peculiar thing about Romans, differentiating it from the rest of Paul's epistles, is just the fact that it was not, or was only in slight degree, aimed at circumstances within a certain congregation. Its purpose is not to correct maladjustments."

should proceed on the initial assumption that this letter was written by Paul to deal with a concrete situation in Rome.”²³ His rationale? All of Paul’s authentic letters, without exception, are addressed to specific situations in churches; and the burden of proof is on those who would argue that Romans is an exception to that pattern. J. Christiaan Beker distinguishes between the coherent content of Paul’s gospel and its situational contingency. All of Paul’s letters are “words on target,” meaning they are addressed to particular, concrete situations.²⁴ Hence, his choice of theological content is governed by and is relevant to the historical situation he is addressing. It would be out of character for Paul to be writing simply for his own self-interests, as it were, to preserve his own gospel for posterity or to send an indirect message to believers in Jerusalem. Paul has a dual purpose for writing: to secure a new mission base and to deal with issues within the Roman church revolving around the Jew/gentile question. The former presents a natural reason for him to be writing. The latter is the more necessary goal of the letter, for the gospel cannot be separated from the circumstances it seeks to address. The letter is not abstract thinking. If the assumptions of Donfried and Beker are correct, and I think they are, then we need to ask what those pressing circumstances were that needed to be addressed by Paul. The answer will be found in the text itself, in both the bookends and the body of the letter. This I will demonstrate once I have resolved the surface structure of the letter.

The Audience of Romans

The issue regarding the audience of the letter has to do not only with the composition of the audience but also with the parties being addressed. Regarding its composition, was it predominantly Jewish or gentile? Clearly it was mixed; it was neither purely Jewish nor purely gentile. Appeals to both would be meaningless if both were not part of the community. Many hold that since the church in Rome was probably

23. Donfried, “False Presuppositions,” 103–4.

24. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), chaps. 2, 3 and 5, esp. 12, 24, 62–63.

established by Jewish Christians, the church must still be predominantly Jewish. Jewish missionaries would have converted more Jews to the church.²⁵ Nevertheless, the consensus is that when Paul wrote Romans, the majority were gentile.²⁶ Cranfield says that it is impossible to prove the ratio of Jew or gentile Christians in Rome, that while there must have been a good number of Jewish Christians, they did not form the majority.²⁷ If we include chapter 16 in the original letter to Rome, which I do,²⁸ we find that only a handful of the twenty-six listed names are of Jewish origin. According to Peter Lampe (who has carefully analyzed the twenty-six names, not counting Aristobulus or Narcissus, who were non-Christians and possibly deceased at the time Paul wrote),²⁹ only three are positively identified as Jews with the attribute *syngenēs*—Andronicus, Junia, and Herodion.³⁰ Aquila can be positively added to that list, and probably Prisca as well (Acts 18:2).³¹

25. William Hendriksen lists multiple arguments for this view (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 20–21). He also lists defenders of this view, including F. C. Baur, T. Zahn, W. Manson, N. Krieger, J. A. C. Van Leeuwen and D. Jacobs. Others include Fahy, Krieger, Leenhardt, Lietzmann, O'Neill, Renan, and Ropes. We do not know when or by whom Christianity first came to Rome. Various answers have been proposed—converts from Pentecost, converts of Paul, Andronicus and Junia being sent as apostolic missionaries from Jerusalem (16:7). Neither Peter nor Paul founded the church. Most assume Jewish missionaries brought Christianity to Rome, and that the Christian community began within the Jewish synagogues. In support of this view is the apparent conflict between Jews and Christians in the 40s leading up to Claudius's edict expelling the Jews in 49. This is strong evidence that Christianity in Rome began with Jewish missionaries in Jewish synagogues. Sanday and Headlam (*Romans*, xxvi–xxviii) argue that the likely origin came from the missionary activities of Paul, that it was more probable that converts of Paul would have had the vision of taking the gospel message to Rome than for converts or evangelists from Jerusalem to do so.
26. Hendriksen (*Romans*, 21) lists multiple arguments for this view. He lists adherents including Sanday and Headlam, Lagrange, Ridderbos, and Murray.
27. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:18–21. Cranfield comments that the expression “among whom you are also” (1:6) may mean no more than that the whole Roman church was situated in a gentile world, and that the expression in 1:13, “as among the rest of the gentiles,” may be viewed as “inexact.” This seems quite unlikely in light of the entire text of 1:13–15.
28. See Karl P. Donfried, “A Short Note on Romans 16,” in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 44–52; Peter Lampe, “The Roman Christians of Romans 16,” in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 216–30 (here 217–21).
29. Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 216–30. This study is based on his book *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten*, WUNT 2/18 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987).
30. Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 224. Lampe observes that the term *syngenēs* does not occur in other Pauline letters (only in Rom. 9:3; 16:7, 11, 21), and that Paul obviously had a “special interest” in using that term in Romans, especially in light of chaps. 9–11. He concludes, “Having this kind of special theological interest in emphasizing the Jewish kinship of Christians in Romans—and only in Romans—Paul probably applies the term ‘kins(wo)man’ rather consistently to all Jewish Christians he can identify in the group of Romans 16” (*ibid.*, 224–25). Aquila is an exception due to the many things Paul attributes to him.
31. Most of us assume Prisca is Jewish, being married to Aquila. However, this is not specifically stated anywhere in Scripture.

Maria is doubtful.³² Others may have been Jewish as well, for Jews often bore Greek or Latin names, and their names do not necessarily reflect their race.³³ However, Lampe argues that Paul had a special interest in emphasizing the Jewish origin of Christians and only a minority (15 percent) of those greeted were thus identified, thereby supporting the view that the vast majority of Christians in Rome were gentile. Another interesting finding of Lampe is that he believes “more than two-thirds of the people . . . have an affinity to slave origins.”³⁴ He claims that four names are definitely not those of slaves or freed(wo)men—Urbanus, Prisca, Aquila, and Rufus. Ten definitely are, and twelve cannot be determined. This pattern, if it mirrored the church as a whole, would correspond proportionately to Roman society as a whole. In this light, perhaps the same could be said for the proportion of Jewish names to that of gentile, which is estimated at that time to be around 10 percent of the population.³⁵ Another not insignificant fact regarding the ratio of Jew and gentile believers has to do with Claudius’ edict eliminating many Jewish believers from the Roman church for an extended period of time, from 49 to 54 CE. By the time Paul wrote in 57, some had returned to Rome, as did Prisca and Aquila, but not all.

I assume, then, that the gentiles were in the majority, the Jews in the minority. But the ratio and numbers of each are not that important. Paul was addressing the entire church. There are those who posit multiple groups of recipients and try to pinpoint just what groups are being addressed in particular sections of the letter. An admirable example of this would be Paul Minear, who unabashedly posits at least five distinct factions in 14:1–15:13, and then proposes that Paul shifts his attention from one group to another throughout the rest of the letter.³⁶ Though his conclusions may be questioned,³⁷ Minear has made

32. Maria was a fairly common Latin name in Rome (Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 225). Theodor Zahn disagrees and views the name as the Hebrew Miriam (*Introduction to the New Testament* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909], 1:429).

33. Aquila and Prisca are Latin names; Andronicus and Junia and Herodion are Greek names; however, all five are Jewish Christians.

34. Lampe, “Roman Christians,” 228.

35. Harry Joshua Leon (*The Jews of Ancient Rome* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995], 135–36) estimates the size of the Jewish community in Rome during the first century CE as around 40,000–50,000 Jews. This may be compared to a total population of Rome of 400,000–500,000.

a good-faith effort to identify the various parties. Many scholars view 1:18-32 (or 1:18-2:16) as addressed to gentiles, and 2:1-3:20 (or 2:17-3:20) as addressed to Jews. Some view chapters 1-4 as addressed primarily to Jews, and 6-8 to gentiles. Richard Longenecker and Ben Witherington hold that Paul is addressing Jews in 1-4 and 9-11, and gentiles in 5-8 and 12-15.³⁸ Kümmel holds that while Romans is addressed to gentiles, Paul is really carrying on a debate with Jews.³⁹ According to Stanley Stowers, 2:1-5 is an apostrophe of a pretentious gentile, chapter 2 begins with “warning a Greek” and ends with “debating a fellow Jew,” and 3:1-9 is dialogue with a fictitious Jew.⁴⁰

There is no need to divide the letter in these ways. We should distinguish between the composition of the audience and the parties to which Paul refers. We need to ask for what reason Paul referred to parties for the benefit of the whole church whom he was addressing. Yes, there were Jewish and gentile Christians in Rome. He says on the one hand, “I am speaking to you who are gentiles”; on the other, “But if you bear the name Jew. . . .” But Paul wrote this from the perspective that the entire church, both Jew and gentile, both the weak and the strong in faith, would be listening as the letter was being read. It is one thing to demonstrate that there were different elements within

36. Paul S. Minear (*The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans*, SBT 2/19 [London SCM, 1971], 8-14, 45n8) divides the Roman Christians into what he perceives to be five groups: group 1: the “weak in faith” who condemned the “strong in faith”; group 2: the “strong in faith” who scorned and despised the “weak in faith”; group 3: the doubters; group 4: the “weak in faith” who did not condemn the “strong in faith”; group 5: the “strong in faith” who did not despise the “weak in faith.” Minear then identifies the specific groups he believes Paul is addressing in the various sections of Romans: All readers in the introduction, 1:1-17, but with distinctions recognized; the “weak in faith,” group 1, in 1:18-4:15; and then 4:16-5:21 is addressed to all the church; the “strong in faith,” group 2, is addressed in chapter 6; while the “weak in faith” is addressed in 7:1-8:8; the “doubters,” group 3, are addressed in 8:9-11:12; and the “weak in faith,” group 2, in 11:13-13:14. Paul’s desire, according to Minear, was for groups 1-3 to move toward groups 4-5 (*ibid.*, 14).

37. See responses by Robert J. Karris, “Romans 14:1-15:13 and the Occasion of Romans,” in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 77-79; and Donfried, “False Presuppositions,” 125-27.

38. Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 20; Richard Longenecker, “The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5.1-8.39 in the Argument of the Letter,” in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 49-69 (here 61, 67-68). Longenecker holds that Romans 5-8 is a distinctive message to the gentiles.

39. Kümmel, *Introduction*, 309.

40. Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 100, 126, 159.

the Roman audience who would be receiving the letter. It is another to divide the letter up by saying that this section was written to this element, and that section to that element. I doubt that the various groups in Rome recognized that this or that section was or was not written specifically to them. Every part of the letter was written with the whole church in mind and for a singular purpose, to unify the body of Christ in Rome. Therefore, when we have an exhortation that appears to be addressed directly to one or the other of these groups, we must view it in the context of how it would be heard within a mixed Jewish-gentile Christian community. Paul was assuming that the entire church, at one time or the other, in house congregations or in larger gatherings, would be listening to the contents of the letter together. His references to the various sectors of the church should be so understood.

Parenthetically, we must remind ourselves that there was no central worship facility where everyone would be gathered to hear the letter. Christians in Rome gathered in house churches.⁴¹ Their homes were no doubt scattered throughout Rome, though perhaps some purposely lived close to each other, as did many Jews. They worshiped in multiple congregations, and one may assume that some were composed primarily of Jewish Christians, while others would attract gentile Christians. Minear finds at least five house churches in Rome (16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15).⁴² Lampe projects that there were at least seven or perhaps eight house churches represented by the twenty-six names in chapter 16.⁴³ Multiple house churches do not in themselves indicate a divided Christian community, but they do leave open that possibility. It is instructive that nowhere in the letter does Paul address the Roman church as a whole as an *ekklēsia*, not even in his opening remarks in 1:1-7. The only reference to an *ekklēsia* in Rome is in 16:5, where Paul

41. It seems evident that in the initial stages of mission activity, believers met in homes (Acts 2:46; 12:12; 16:15, 40; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; and Rom. 16:23). There were obviously more than a few house churches in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5, 14-15), being such a large city.

42. Minear, *Obedience*, 7.

43. Lampe, "Roman Christians," 229-30. This stands contrary to Zahn's suggestion that all those mentioned in vv. 5-13 were members of the house church of Prisca and Aquila (Zahn, *Introduction*, 1:429-30).

refers to the “church” that is in the house of Prisca and Aquila.⁴⁴ The “divided” or “diverse” nature of the Roman Christian community helps bring our perception of them into better balance. The point is this. The letter was meant to be read to all the believers in Rome in whatever circumstances they found themselves. Paul was not jumping to one or the other constituent in his remarks. Nor were the gentiles sitting there listening to Paul debate with Jews for several chapters, or even with an imaginary Jewish interlocutor.

Nevertheless, while Christian Jews were among the audience of Paul’s letter, they were not the primary focus of his remarks. Paul’s mission as the apostle to the gentiles was to bring about the gentiles’ obedience of faith. Thus, while addressing his remarks to the entire body of believers in Rome, and while making reference to specific parties in Rome, Paul is primarily concerned that the gentiles respond to his message. Yes, the letter as a whole is addressed specifically “to all the saints in Rome” (1:7). Paul uses the second-person plural “you” constantly from 1:8-15—“I give thanks for you all” (1:8), “I unceasingly make mention of you always in my prayers” (1:9-10), “I long to see you in order to impart some spiritual gift to you” (1:11). From this use of the plural “you,” one could conclude that Paul was being inclusive, referring to both Jew and gentile Christians in Rome, and in part he was.⁴⁵ But in 1:13-15 Paul clearly restricts his use of the second-person plural to gentiles in a carefully constructed statement (literally translated):⁴⁶

44. The other four references to *ekklēsia* in Romans 16 (vv. 1, 4, 16, 23) refer respectively to the church at Cenchrea, all the churches of the gentiles, all the churches of Christ, and the church of which Gaius is host in Corinth.

45. One would think Prisca and Aquila would be included in the salutation as well as Paul’s prayers and thanksgivings for them.

46. This literal translation also reflects the literal order of words in the original text.

¹³But I want you [pl.] to know, brothers and sisters,
 that many times I planned to come to you [pl.], A
 and I was hindered until now,
 in order that some fruit I might have even among you [pl.]
 as also among the rest of the gentiles [pl.]. B
¹⁴Both to the Greeks and to the barbarians, B
 both to the wise and to the foolish [pl.]
 I am a debtor.
¹⁵Thus I am eager also to you [pl.] who are in Rome A
 to proclaim the gospel.

Whether or not we want to see a chiasm here is not the issue, though the asyndeton as well as the word order introducing verse 14 do seem to suggest it.⁴⁷ The order of the clauses and of the words within clauses is revealing. It is quite clear that Paul is narrowing his focus to the gentiles. He is writing with them in mind. This narrowing of focus on gentiles occurs just prior to the body of the letter.

Immediately following the body of the letter, in 15:14-18, Paul again restricts his use of the second-person plural to gentile believers. He uses sacral terminology for his role in bringing about the “obedience of the gentiles.”

¹⁴And I have been persuaded, my brothers, even I myself, concerning you [pl.], that you [pl.] yourselves [pl.] are full of goodness, having been filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.

¹⁵But I have written more boldly to you [pl.] on some points, so as to remind you [pl.] again because of the grace given to me by God, ¹⁶to be a minister [*leitourgon*] of Christ Jesus unto the gentiles, serving as a priest

47. Cranfield (*Romans*, 1:83) acknowledges the presence of the asyndeton and thinks it adds “solemnity” to the statement. Commentators debate whether these pairings refer to the whole of humanity (including Jews) or the whole of the gentile world. *Hellēsin* probably refers to those of Greco-Roman culture, and *barbarois* to those of foreign culture. *Hellēn* can certainly be restricted to the pagan gentile, or non-Jew. According to James D. G. Dunn (*Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A [Waco: Word, 1988], 32-33), these terms came to be used generally of all races and classes within the gentile world. Wise and foolish is another way of classifying humankind as a whole, synonymous with the preceding contrast. So the function of these designations is to include all of gentile humanity. This leads naturally into v. 15, and the necessary inference that this restriction to gentiles applies to “all” who are in Rome as well. *Romans* 1:13-15 is clearly restricted to the gentiles.

[*hierourgounta*] the gospel of God, so that the sacrifice [*hē prosphora*] of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified [*hēgiasmēnē*] by the Holy Spirit. . . .

¹⁸For I will not presume to speak of anything except that which Christ has accomplished through me unto the obedience of the gentiles in word and deed.

Paul presents himself as a priest presiding over offerings to God. The gentiles are that offering,⁴⁸ and the result is “acceptable,” namely, sanctified by the Holy Spirit—a distinctly Jewish way of referring to his calling as the apostle to the gentiles. It is quite unmistakable that Paul is concerned to direct his remarks to the gentiles in Rome, whether or not they constituted a majority. He refers to the grace given him as the apostle to the gentiles (1:5-6; 11:13; 12:3; 15:15-16). He identifies his readers as gentiles (1:13-15; 11:13; 15:14-18). He addresses his concerns about his “kinsmen according to the flesh” to gentiles (chaps. 9–11). He recalls their former sinful lives as heathen (6:17-22) and states that he wants to bear some fruit among them as among the rest of the gentiles (1:11-15). Perhaps his purpose is best stated in 1:5: “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for his name’s sake.”⁴⁹

We come, then, to note these important realities as we read Romans. Paul is addressing the entire letter to the entire body of believers in Rome. While addressing the entire body of believers, Paul makes reference to specific parties within the church as well as to sectors of society at large. That is only natural to do, and the entire body understands that he is referring to this or that sector of believers (or nonbelievers). However, as one given grace as the apostle to the gentiles to bring about their obedience of faith, Paul is primarily addressing his remarks to gentile believers in Rome. This is how we approach Paul’s entire dialogue in the letter. Whether we are

48. Dunn (*Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B [Waco: Word, 1989], 860–61) notes that *hē prosphora tōn ethnōn* can be either (1) the act of presenting an offering (e.g., Acts 24:17; Heb. 10:14, 18) or (2) the offering itself (Acts 21:26; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:5, 8). If *tōn ethnōn* is a genitive of apposition, then Paul would be viewing the gentiles as the offering itself, acceptable as sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

49. Stowers (*A Rereading of Romans*, 29–30) speaks of the letter’s “explicitly encoded audience,” the gentiles; and he remarks that “it was once fashionable for scholars to say that Romans was addressed to Jewish Christians, but owing to the objections raised by Johannes Munck and others this position is no longer plausible.” See Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959), 196–209. Elliott (*Arrogance of Nations*, 177n67) says that “Romans must be interpreted as an argument directed to the explicit addressees.”

interpreting his exposition of the wrath of God in 1:18-32, or the litany of questions in 3:1-9, or the appeal for Israel in chapters 9-11, or the exhortations to the strong and weak in 14:1-15:6, the hermeneutic is the same. Paul is writing to the whole church in Rome. He may refer directly to this or that party within the church, but he never forgets that the whole church is listening. Moreover, he is writing with his primary audience in mind, the gentile believers in Rome. How will his letter influence their obedience of faith?

The occasion for his writing was his anticipated trip to Rome. He wanted to encourage their spiritual growth in Christ and to enlist their involvement in his mission to go beyond Rome as far as Spain. He explains all of this in the bookends of the letter. My thesis is that the body of the letter serves to address circumstances in Rome. I make a distinction in this study between the “surface structure” that “guides” the audience through the letter, and the “underlying issues” that “govern” or “drive” the content of the letter. As is the case in other letters of Paul, the surface structure of Romans guides the narrative and in the process points to the underlying issues that are driving the narrative. The more clearly we understand the surface structure of Romans, the more credible will become our understanding of why Paul wrote Romans. In the end, the coherence of the entire letter should become evident.